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Recommended Citation

Kitchens, Emily, "Puppy Love and [Information] Play: An Intersection of Theatre, Queer Kink, and Consent" (2023). *Faculty and Research Publications*. 6934.

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Puppy *Love and [Information]* Play: An Intersection of Theatre, Queer Kink, and Consent

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Emily Kitchens (she/her), MFA, is a theatre artist based out of NYC and Atlanta and is currently Assistant Professor of Acting at Kennesaw State University. She has acted in contemporary and classical works with theaters including: American Conservatory Theater, Yale Repertory Theatre, The Kennedy Center, The Guthrie Theater, Berkeley Repertory Theatre, The Denver Center for the Performing Arts, The Alliance Theatre. Her original works have been performed in NYC, the Bay Area, Edinburgh, Berlin, and Leesburg, GA. Her writing appears in *American Theatre*, *Brooklyn Rail*, *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*. MFA: ACT. BFA: University of Evansville. She is mother to Ramrao.

Introduction

This note from the field centers on a nexus of queer kink subcultures and consent-based intimacy work in theatre. Importantly, as I detail process, learnings, and craft, I note that I am a white, queer, cisgendered woman not currently living with a disability¹. What follows was, in effect, my introduction to queer kink subcultures; I'm not a kinkster and have never been in a BDSM "scene." Thus, although trailblazing theorists, artists and scholars have been doing revelatory deep dives into the sexual, racial, political, and performative intersections of BDSM (see, for example: Cruz 2016; Flanagan 1993; Leiser 2019), my introduction to these intersections was as a performing artist who recently incorporated queer kink aesthetics in theatrical work, and I find myself compelled to report and investigate the ways in which cultural competency impacted our process. This note shares potentially useful instances of collective learning, accountability, and playfulness to investigate methods for culture-building around consent-based performance practices. I'm reminded of a time a former cast member of mine retorted with an audience member in a post-show talkback—"It's called a play, not a serious." I see a theoretical generative alignment of kink and theatre as descendants of the bonds of performance and play, but what I have learned and hope to demonstrate throughout this paper, is that queer kink subcultures can be paradigmatic examples of communities built on consent, and we as performing arts practitioners can more visibly expand the margins of our cultural and emotional competency dialogues to not only include them but look to them as productive modes to investigate relationships of power, embodiment, and performance.

First, I will provide contextual information about the play we worked on, including some specifics about process, approach, and personnel. Then I'll wrangle with some of our rehearsal experiences and the intentions and impacts involved. I will contend that learning about queer kink subcultures was an avenue into productive embodiments of consent, and I will invite space for more scholars and artists to explore kinky intimacy work in the performing arts as kinksters and non-kinksters.²

Collaborative Framework and Concepts

I directed a university production of *Love and Information*³ by Caryl Churchill in February 2023. Though it is one of Churchill's most recent works, I was unfamiliar with the play until the previous year's production season selection process. As one of the coordinators of the Acting Concentration in my university's theatre department, I was hunting for scripts that were inherently

inclusive of abundant intersectional identities in their casting possibilities, and I came across it. The more I talked about the play, the more I realized I might like to direct it, as it speaks pretty loudly to my personal aesthetic. Its intentionally sparse format and open given circumstances demand principles we prize most in our training program: critical thinking, problem solving, and collaboration.

With fifty-seven short plays, more with the optional “Random” section, as dictated by the playwright, we’re not living in a *Love Actually* (Curtis 2003) or *Valentine’s Day* (Marshall 2010) movie world where everything ties into each other or people know each other in different stories. The playwright has made it clear—these are separate and distinct worlds. Quite possibly the trap of this piece is to try to connect them all. So, we became interested in divesting from a familiar and often patriarchal five-act play structure and investing in the pieces/fragments/short plays that make up a whole. I felt we got to lean into its queerness.

We saw relatable and modern context for this notion in Instagram: scrolling social media—posts or stories— is being in one world/short play after another. You are an audience to a good friend’s baby, followed by an ad about underwear, followed by pictures of an ex’s trip to Prague. The only thing that links these experiences to each other is me—my scrolling session—however long or short it may be. We invited audiences to experience this play as an Instagram feed—scrolling through distinctly different posts/stories/plays.

Importantly, at its core, this play is about what it is called—love and information. It’s impossible to divorce technology from the way information and, arguably, love are relayed in our modern contexts. To that end, our production team was interested in accessibility in communication. We used a web captioner, and audiences observed words of the piece appearing on the screen as they were being spoken. It is meaningful to identify that our live supertitles, though moving in the direction of inclusionary theatre, were by no means a perfect solution or accommodation. They did reflect a preliminary experiment into how we can bring live theatre to life for more people’s diverse backgrounds and experiences, influenced in part by Carolyn Lazard’s powerful treatise on “Accessibility and the Arts” (2019).

What precedes is prudent for understanding choices within the design process, approaches in the rehearsal room, and experimental goals for the audience’s experience. With this design idea of an Instagram feed, there were strong world-building impulses from our collaborative team made up of students, faculty and professional artists with diverse intersectional identities. We followed

our creative noses, so to speak. The scent of what was interesting led to many of our earliest drafts of worlds. A rave for a short play called “Secret,” a content creator’s youtube feed with screens for another called “The Child Who Didn’t Know Fear,” and so on. Our costume designer, Andrew, volleyed up a BDSM “puppy play scene” for the piece that is called “Dog.” This is the short play in its entirety:

DOG

Come. Sit. Stay. Come. Good dog. Fetch. Drop it. Fetch. Good dog. Roll over.

Good dog. Come. Heel. No. Come. (Churchill 2013)

I’m ignorant as to whether this is a common design interpretation of this moment in the script, but he conceived of this puppy play as a vibrantly pink, almost Gibson Girl femme in a BDSM scene with a pup in a leather dog mask, mesh shirt, boots, and leash.



Andrew Hobson. “Dog,” *Love and Information*, 2023.

Pup Play: A Queer Kink Subculture

As we would learn and discuss, puppy (or pup) play is a type of role-play behavior in which adult humans adopt the characteristics of dogs often with specialist gear (Wignall & McCormack 2017). It largely stems out of the broader BDSM (bondage and discipline, domination and

submission, and sadomasochism) community, and there is burgeoning research that it is best understood phenomenologically as a kink “postmodern-subculture” (Lawson & Langdridge 2020, 574). Wignall and McCormack define “kink” as “the collection of activities that involve the mutually consensual and conscious use, among two or more people of pain, power, perceptions about power, or any combination thereof, for psychological, emotional, or sensory pleasure” (2017, 801).

I’m totally game for the design offering from our costume designer. I love that he had this strong impulse. The rendering is already a postmodern work of art—totally gorgeous and subverting cultural expectations, almost invoking the work of Guillermo Gómez-Peña⁴ in its “cyber-punk” blurring of borders aesthetic. I also think, “Whew, I’m so glad we had the opportunity to budget for an intimacy coordinator to facilitate this work.” As the director, not only was I faced with my lack of familiarity with kink cultures, but I saw relational choices depicted in the design that suggested enactment in some fashion or other for which I wanted more support.

From jump, we wanted to bring on board an intimacy coordinator because, though there was much conceptual openness about what each of these worlds would be, the thematic subject matter of love (and information) implicitly lent to the inclusion of intimacy or the deliberate exclusion of intimacy. Furthermore, there were a few worlds that were at least somewhat textually interested in touch. Moreover, I’m personally becoming an advocate that this is invaluable personnel in any rehearsal process—if solely as a third eye on the text pointing to dialogues around consent. We lucked into an amazing Atlanta-based professional intimacy coordinator, Ash,⁵ willing to dig in with us. We started the rehearsal process with workshopping consent-based spaces together on our feet, particularly focusing on defining boundaries with ourselves and each other. I think this paved multiple pathways to a trusting environment, flexibility, transparency in creative collaboration, and care.

Adrien, the student actor playing the pup partner in “Dog,” approached me after the company design presentation about snickering and unfortunate comments from some cast members in reference to the design for “Dog.” Adrien is a trans man and was completing his senior year. He believed the nature of their discomfort came from being uninformed on queer kink, and he wanted to address it head on. He volunteered to prepare a few words for our subsequent tablework rehearsal, and I wholeheartedly invited his perspective. In the moment, I think I mostly saw Adrien’s impulse as a gesture of care for the rehearsal room and of modeling transparency of

communication. Hindsight has exposed to me my shortsightedness about the heavy cultural competency lifting Adrien generously undertook, as a trans person, an actor, and a student. Adrien educated those involved in the process, teaching us that there are many motivating factors of kink:

There are lots of people who are in the kink community for various reasons. The way the world treats gay folks, trans and nonbinary people, and those on the Asexual spectrum can be deeply traumatizing. And a lot of these people turn to kink as a way to express themselves sexually that doesn't trigger that trauma. Kink, when practiced correctly, is all about mutual respect, establishing and maintaining boundaries, and rejecting the heterosexual binary.⁶

Admittedly, I had no clue about the nuanced sociological debate and scholarly work on kink subcultures.⁷ Indeed, investigating the pup play subculture was an opportunity for my personal queer identity to expand and to queer, as I was confronted with some of my own heteronormative and queernormative (see Fielding 2020) societal ideals. As Wignall and McCormack articulate, there has traditionally been a contested pathological classification of kink activities. They go on to highlight the problems of that model and cite another sociological research point on kink: "The community is a rich and complex social organization constructed around an immersive recreational pursuit" (Newmahr 2011; Wignall & McCormack 2017). Though I probably wouldn't go as far as to say "pathological," I had osmosed the pop culture BDSM tropes perpetuated by *50 Shades of Grey*. Any notion of pup play I had was that it is a gay male kink. And though aware of the manifold manifestations of perversion in queer culture, I had lumped kinks and fetishes into purely sexual preferences. Though there may be some nuanced unpacking of truths to do in my assumptions, I hadn't acknowledged the intersectional belonging possible in perversion, that Ariane Cruz highlights as a realignment of "perversion in a way that queers—lays bare and denaturalizes—the discursive mechanisms of sexuality as a technology of power to contest the terms of intimacy" (2016, 13). I hadn't acknowledged consensual community and care.

Puppy packs and communities, like other BDSM communities, are not groupings brought together through biology or cultural expectation but instead freely chosen and egalitarian caring relationships... They bring considerable comfort and support, as well as sexual pleasure and fun, within a mutually sustaining commitment, and are sustained on that basis alone. (Langdrige & Lawson 2019)

When I think about subcultures, my mind immediately goes to surfers, folx who are living life by the tides. I think about rock climbers ascending the next peak. Language and gesture get formed and evolve as a function of the specific relational aspects of the sport and its members.

Cecilia Cutler writes, “Language plays a key role in the creation and maintenance of subcultures as a way to signal distinctiveness” (2006, 236). BDSM scholar Ayesha Kaak establishes there is a common language of consent within BDSM kink communities (2016). Among a few other variations, the terms “Safe, Sane and Consensual (SSC)” and “Risk-Aware Consensual Kink (RACK)” are popular acronyms articulating the philosophical model.⁸

A Messy Coherence

All design, dramaturgical and performance-related “Dog” conversations continued to be complex, very raw, with lots of feelings throughout the collaborative team—some folx being changed and engaged by Adrien’s address to the group; some folx finding a great excitement in pursuing a kink depiction in a somewhat simultaneously realistic and surrealistic frame; some finding an emotional resonance from lived experience; some not really having any point of reference and interested in learning; some voicing thoughts as in “no matter what you do, people are going to laugh if you go on stage in a dog mask with a leash around your neck,” or “people are going to feel really uncomfortable,” or “are you really going to use a riding crop?” or “isn’t this inappropriate?” or “I feel like my peers are going to construe things about me if I am on stage for this”; some calling into question the efficacy of Andrew’s design, that perhaps if we saw a more realistic depiction of a pup play scene audiences would take it more seriously. One of the student dramaturgs advocated to me privately that they didn’t want to lead the dramaturgical support on this scene. And in these specific conversations around kink, I always felt led back to a mental exercise around power dynamics being immediately real. Real as in the essence of the BDSM subculture we’re representing and in the collaborative process we’re engaging as diverse individuals belonging to all kinds of cultural and subcultural identities that occupy a spectrum of systemic societal privilege and disenfranchisement. In practice, there are many intersections of power and consent in a rehearsal room. Not the least of which are projected or actual hierarchies within a creative ecosystem. I can do everything I’ve learned to care for others’ individual nervous systems⁹ and felt sense of safety or trust in a rehearsal process, and still there are power dynamics at play purely by being a director/teacher in the room. We had already invited boundary-setting language into the process. I felt we were activating deep listening to each other by prioritizing nuanced, open conversations and acknowledging gaps of cultural and emotional competencies as Adrien had embodied. We had united in practices of respect in the form of community agreements and access needs. And though there was an undercurrent of consent primacy running through our

work, I wondered if explicitly naming the nature of (projected) collaborative power dynamics (e.g. teacher, director, designer, actor, student, etc) at the beginning of a rehearsal process would offer additional alignment of mutuality and boundaries? Does that level of transparency further support choice of participation as it seems to in consensual kink agreements?

I was experiencing accountability as a symptom of being in a position of authority, and sometimes it was just plain challenging. I was afraid of causing unintentional harm. I felt my limitations of facilitating often powerfully intersectional discourse. I wondered if we would cut “Dog” out of the show: it is in the optional “Random” section of the piece. Even though the costume shop had begun building the elaborate pieces for “Dog,” I wondered if the moment of the whole play it occupied was worth the amount of time and energy in conversation, research, and discomfort we were giving it. Would any of this matter to an audience?

And therein lies another useful thread of interrogating craft and the nature of consent within the performing arts: we can never predict exactly what an audience will take away from any given performance. Even if we try to spoon-feed precision, the ephemera of a live art form includes, "How is this landing with this make up of individuals that is today's audience?" Essentially, is an audience consenting to a dose of the unknown by showing up to live art? I have counted that as a productive thing about theatre—the continuous practice of letting go of control, a rehearsal of faith. This perspective becomes problematized looking through the lens of queer kink where the interchange of power, pain and pleasure necessitate consent above all else. How are we taking care of the audience as well as this grouping of artists? For those of us in the performing arts, this echoes in the age-old process and product dialectic, compounded in an educational environment in a Capitalist country.

Teresa De Lauretis writes in her iconic introduction to *differences* (Vol 3 Issue 2) on queer theory:

The differences made by race in self-representation and identity argue for the necessity to examine, question, or contest the usefulness and/or the limitations of current discourses on lesbian and gay sexualities, be those discourses dominant, or be they separatist, emergent, or oppositional. Those differences urge the reframing of the questions of queer theory from different perspectives, histories, experiences, and in different terms. (1991, x)

In the performing arts, I see exploring intersectional constructs of queer kink subcultures as another lens in which to investigate the “usefulness and limitations” of our current systems and

organization: ways we scrutinize, imagine, and rethink relationships with an audience; intentional and unspoken hierarchies in rehearsal processes; language and rhetoric; and structure of performance texts and training models.

This is the moment that was a sort of messy coherence of theatre, kink and consent for me. Midway through the process the actor playing the femme handler in “Dog” found me and said privately, “I thought that I was okay, but actually I don't feel comfortable doing this scene.” Even though we were weeks into rehearsal, I counted that as a real win for the process: this actor being able to take space. Hopefully, particularly in an educational environment, we get these moments to affirm, “I hear you. Thank you for coming to me. *You* are making a choice. This is a powerful example of consent, of feeling like you are autonomous in this process to decline, to say no.” The actor needed those weeks of process to know their boundaries. There was another actor that jumped at the chance to be in the scene, “Absolutely, yes, I want to do this.” Facilitating the transition of partners felt very delicate; it was something that had to be cared for, albeit imperfectly, with affirming and complex conversations.

Because we had started the process with workshopping embodied consent, I believe we as a subculture of makers were set up to become literate with its language. Our language of consent was learning new spaces for simultaneously holding, “I'm uncomfortable with this” and, to borrow a surfer term, “I'm stoked for this.” We're setting ourselves up for embodiment of our own autonomy through active choice. In fact, I felt more autonomous to embrace the queerness of the original design, subverting any “normative” perception of a pup play scene. Somatically, we might say that an embodied experience of autonomy lays foundations of support for intimacy. From this place, there can be an experience of the paradigm shift from “I have a body” to “I am a body.”¹⁰ I experience the sensation of my body walls, where I begin and end. I acknowledge and respect my individual process, as well as another's. Interestingly, this can often invite more of a feeling of the impersonal—in a useful way. I experience more freedom with connections to others, and partnering exchanges come and go with ease having a felt sense of my autonomy.

Imperfect Intention and Imperfect Impacts

Our intimacy coordinator had a reflection that in theatre, TV, or film we never see the moment before the BDSM ‘scene.’ The moment of getting ready. The moment of nerves or excitement and establishing consent of the events to follow. They advised that kink gets to be very

taboo in performance because we focus on the sexual act not the humans involved. So, they had this idea of “Dog” actually being a sort of rehearsal of what was to come as the partners are getting each other dressed and ready. That the femme handler is rehearsing her lines, “Come, sit, stay...” with a degree of nerves as she adjusts her partner’s mask and collar, then there’s a moment of caring touch from the partner playing the pup to slow her down and a sweet affirming kiss. The ‘scene’ begins with the final word, “Come.” As the actors assume dominant and submissive positions, the lights blackout. This was the choreography we developed with Ash and the actors, and when we got costumes in the room, we had to make a few adjustments to communicate the story of care. The dog mask’s closure mechanism was different than we had thought and holding a parasol and riding crop just got complicated. We simplified. We opted for using the parasol in a way a BDSM scene might incorporate a riding crop. It was a great reminder of the moving pieces of collaborative art forms and of given circumstances being an opportunity for critical thinking. I remember the first time we did a run-through with this moment in the context of the whole play, I was in tears because the actors were in such care of each other. In this production of a play called *Love and Information*, I felt definitively this part of it is about love.

For me, another takeaway of working with putting queer kink culture on stage in *Love and Information*, even in a tiny little moment, is to ask the question: Is it love? Is it motivated by love? And of course, the answer doesn't have to be yes. But isn't it an interesting question? Couldn't it be a useful point of investigation in this kind of work? Is there love here? In this scene between the characters? Or as an actor with my scene partner? Or self-love, me to myself? Or more globally with the audience? In an acting class, can I give that as a sub question in "what do I want?"¹¹: ‘Where is the love?’ We started to ask that question in working on each short play. Potentially, love roots craft in positive actions. I remember being taught in grad school that positive actions are very interesting, especially when they're harder to choose.¹² I loved relearning that through engaging and gaining more competence with kink culture in this play. In that way, love is perverse and queers. Love as a word can come with baggage and mean many things. I know that it's not going to be so useful for everyone, but in this context and with these people, I found it mostly was. It set us up for care, inquiry, and growth, as well as holding space for different opinions, feelings and embodiments.

Reflecting on audience’s responses to our interpretation of “Dog,” I can say there was a gamut of mundane to excitable reactions. It is such a brief moment in a sea of brief moments that

I imagine for some folk the whole play was an experiment of short-term memory retention. Because of the university setting, there were friends and peers in the audience whispering, guffawing, clapping, and lots of contemplative “hmmmm’s.” And then there was the occasional reflection of surprise—that the moment caught them off guard. I heard things like, “I was surprised how tender and pretty it was.” “It was sweetly subversive.” Somebody reflected after seeing the show that they were glad to see kink depicted in something that felt real. And I often ponder the impacts of a political intention Adrien laid out, “I think it’s extremely important to represent kink on stage, to show a partially naked trans body on stage, and to openly acknowledge the importance of kink in altering what we as a society consider socially acceptable sex.” I wonder how that translated to an audience. Did representation and approach plant a societal seed, as Adrien proposes?

Conclusion

Exploring pup play in *Love and Information*, we found various loci of consent with theory and embodiment. Traversing a theatrical process necessitating cultural competence with a queer kink subculture amplified the intersectional, nuanced and sometimes surprising power dynamics in a rehearsal room. Indeed, it prioritized consent at most turns in our making, which organized space for emergence of boundaries, integrational spirit, and aesthetic innovation. Going forward, I think there’s more to learn as collaborative artists from these subcultures built on consent. There’s more to be studied in these ecosystems that embrace and embody the elevated stakes of consent in power dynamics that applies to intersectional anti-oppression work navigating positionalities in creative spaces—be it a rehearsal room, a performance, a conversation. Additionally, I think creating informed spaces to problematize the heteronormative societal ideas of perversion can craft more complexities in the work of the artist. It feels messy and productive. More than anything, I hope this note from the field is an invitation for more visible dialogue on queer kink in the performing arts. I'd love to hear from others, scholars and artists doing this work. What are you learning? How's it going?

¹ As many researchers on reflexivity argue, power dynamics situate knowledge, and I remark particularly in a director/facilitator role with a combination of students and theatre professionals. I know that even as I work to uncover and eradicate unconscious and conscious biases in myself, they exist.

² Though “kinkster” is a term heard popularly, I probably first heard it on [Savage Love](#), Dan Savage's podcast

³ I'd like to acknowledge and thank the cast, crew, designers, production team, and faculty and staff for all the dedicated work on this production. Where I reference personnel, I have sought and been granted permission to use their names and contributions. I'd like to specifically thank Tom Fish, PhD, as KSU resident dramaturg and his mentorship to the student dramaturgs on this production, as well as his invaluable collaborative spirit.

⁴ Samples of Guillermo Gómez-Peña's illustrious work can be seen on the artist's website <https://www.guillermogomezpena.com>

⁵ Ash Anderson is a tremendous human and resource in this work. More on them [here](#)

⁶ Adrien Kay graciously sent these words to me in an email prior to sharing them with the team. He also graciously gives permission for me to share them in this note.

⁷ Many researchers highlight the critical and undertheorized nature of the intersections of race in queer kink subcultures, such as the imperative interventions of Ariane Cruz's *The Color of Kink: Black Women, BDSM and Pornography* and Amber Jamilla Musser's *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism*.

⁸ Other kink philosophy of consent model acronyms sourced from google:

Personal Responsibility, Informed, Consensual Kink (PRICK)

Safe, Sane, Informed, Consensual, Kink (SSICK)

Committed, Compassionate, Consensual (CCC) and the 4 C's — Caring, Communication, Consent, Caution

⁹ Though introduced to principles of the autonomic nervous system and Polyvagal Theory by Jeffrey Crockett, I loved encountering Sheridan Schreyer's powerful paper in JCBP on incorporating this into the work <https://doi.org/10.46787/jcbp.v2i1.3495>

¹⁰ There are many approaches to embodiment and somatic experiencing work. The principles and terms I use are learned and interpreted from the Breath Embodiment work of Jeffrey Crockett from [Middendorf Breathwork](#). His work is foundational in my teaching, facilitating and artistry.

¹¹ The acting questions. Derived from the work of Stanislavski, "What Do I Want?" is the phrasing based in the work of Earle Gister that I learned in actor training and generally use with students in acting classes.

¹² Among the instrumental teachers that taught this principle to me were Melissa Smith, Gregory Wallace, Domenique Lozano, Stephen Buescher and Jonathon Moscone

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