

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

“I WANT YOU TO HIT ME AS HARD AS YOU CAN”:
BDSM AS QUEER SENSUALITY AND RADICAL
COMMUNITY FORMATION IN *FIGHT CLUB*

by
CHRISTIE GHATTAS CHOUEIRI

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by
CHRISTIE GHATTAS CHOUEIRI

Approved by:

Dr. Kathryn Rebecca Maude, Assistant Professor
Department of English

Signature



Advisor

Dr. Suzanne Enzerink, Assistant Professor (external)
School of Humanities and Social Sciences,
University of Saint Gallen

Signature



Member of Committee

Dr. David Currell, Associate Professor
Department of English

Signature



Member of Committee

Date of thesis defense: December 7, 2022

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Christie Ghattas Choueiri

for Master of Arts
English Literature

Title: “I Want You to Hit Me as Hard as You Can”: BDSM as Queer Sensuality and Radical Community Formation in *Fight Club*

My thesis explores dynamics of queerness, alternative community formation, and radical violence within *Fight Club* in order to categorize the activity taking place within the Fight Club space as BDSM. Firstly, I categorize the homoerotic violence taking place within Fight Club as “queer” through its use of non-heteronormative BDSM. Then, in the following chapter, I focus on three aspects of community restructuring taking place in Fight Club. I describe the Fight Club space as one where friendships, rather than romantic relationships, emerge, where care is readily exchanged between members, and where consensual (rather than non-consensual) violence is used. These three communal elements are discussed in conjunction with BDSM theory in order to prove that the Fight Club community functions, fundamentally, as a transgressive BDSM collective whose ethos goes against patriarchal heterocapitalism. Finally, my conclusion discusses the halting of the BDSM dynamic in *Fight Club* through a comparison between the Fight Club space and its nefarious counterpart, the Project Mayhem space. Ultimately, my thesis aims to provide nuance on the dynamics occurring in Fight Club in order to highlight how transgressive this space truly is, as I believe critics have overlooked the highly radical potential of the activity taking place in Fight Club.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. Background and Literature Review

During the end of my second year as a graduate student, I had to decide on a thesis topic. I knew that I was going to be discussing BDSM, to some capacity, as I had included BDSM theory in much of my academic writing up to that point, and I knew that I wanted to dedicate an entire thesis to the exploration of BDSM. As I was mentally rummaging through the BDSM-related media I had consumed over the years, I immediately thought of *Fight Club*. At the time, I had only watched Fincher's cinematic adaptation of Palahniuk's novel, and I went through flashbacks of scenes from the movie: sweaty, half-naked men writhing in pain and pleasure in dark, underground spaces hidden from public view. "It's too obvious," I thought, going over bits and pieces of the movie and realizing just how BDSM-centric the narrative actually is. However, after reading both the novel and its surrounding literature, I noticed that what was vehemently transparent to me was not so for others within academia. That's when I knew I had to write about this, not only because the BDSM in the novel had either been ignored or misconstrued, but also because its potential to be radically transgressive—through the use of alternative bodily practices and non-normative community structure—was almost entirely unrecognized.

Throughout my thesis, I argue that the fighting that goes on in the underground spaces of the novel can be categorized as transgressive BDSM through body practices and interpersonal dynamics that defy norms of capitalism, heterosexuality, and patriarchy. Furthermore, I will also be proving that the BDSM in the novel comes to a

halt as soon as the aforementioned norms are re-adopted, and, consequently, the dynamics presented go from radically transgressive, to downright abusive. It is important to note that my thesis also utilizes works discussing Fincher's cinematic adaptation of the novel. Even though I focus on events happening in Palahniuk's text—and not Fincher's movie—I find that some of the literature surrounding the movie engages largely with the *Fight Club* narrative, which is similar across the movie and the novel. As such, I believe the use of texts discussing the overall narrative to be necessary, especially that one of these texts—Steven Allen's *Playing with Control*—is particularly relevant to the argument I make in its discussion of *Fight Club* as BDSM.

Prior to discussing the literature surrounding Palahniuk's novel, it is necessary to provide context for the events and characters I dissect. The *Fight Club* narrative tells the story of Joe¹, an insomniac who is bored and disgruntled with his corporate job. He goes to a doctor who recommends that Joe “[sees] real pain,” by attending support groups for a number of serious illnesses including brain parasites, degenerative bone diseases, cancer, etc. (Palahniuk, 19). Joe takes this suggestion all too seriously, as he lies his way into becoming a chronic support group attendee, falsely claiming that he too shares the physical plight that everyone else does. For years, Joe attends these support groups, as these spaces allow him to fully express his feelings and frustrations and emote in a way that he doesn't feel is accessible in the outside world. Unfortunately for Joe, one of his most emotionally cathartic spaces—a support group for testicular cancer called “Remaining Men Together”—gets breached by a “faker” called Marla

¹ The character is not formally called “Joe”. To readers, the character is most recognizably known as the novel's narrator. However, during several occasions in the novel, the character refers to himself as belonging to the body of a “Joe”—“I am Joe's Prostate,” “I am totally Joe's Gallbladder,” “I am Joe's Raging Bile Duct,” “I am Joe's Grinding Teeth,” (Palahniuk, 58-59). As such, I found that the most suitable naming for the narrator would be “Joe”.

Singer (*ibid*, 18). This is when the novel truly begins, as Joe decides to take a vacation and meets the novel's second protagonist: Tyler. After Joe and Tyler meet on a beach, the latter gives the former his number which would soon come to use, as Joe comes back to a condominium that had exploded. He calls Tyler for a place to stay, and they end up sharing Tyler's apartment on Paper Street. One night, when the pair are out at a bar, Tyler asks Joe to hit him. After some hesitation, Joe decides to try it, and the two end up enjoying the fight so much so that they create Fight Club—an underground all-male arena where men engage in consensual violence in order to escape their everyday lives as husbands, fathers, employees, and/or financial providers. At the same time, outside of Fight Club, a strange love triangle emerges between Joe, Tyler, and Marla. Joe desires Tyler, but the latter is, to a degree, involved with Marla. The dynamic between Tyler and Marla, however, is one-sided and detrimental on the part of Marla, as she is in perpetual emotional turmoil at the hands of Tyler, and the latter uses her for access to sex and to her mother's collagen, which he uses to manufacture and sell high-quality soap.

As the novel progresses, Tyler and Joe's initiative gains significant momentum, and a number of Fight Clubs emerge all across the country. Tyler sees this as an opportunity to expand even further and forms Project Mayhem, an anarchist organization that works at "destroying every scrap of history" (*ibid*, 12) through the dismantling of all things wrong with society, an example of which is corporate buildings (symbols of capitalism). Just as Project Mayhem starts growing more powerful, Tyler disappears, and Joe tries to track him down by going to Fight Club bars where he is unexpectedly met with a number Fight Club members calling him "sir," (*ibid*, 135). As is soon revealed by Tyler, the reason for this is Tyler is, to some

capacity, an extension of Joe. Palahniuk writes, “Tyler is a projection. He’s a dissociative personality disorder. A psychogenic fugue state. Tyler Durden is my hallucination,” (ibid, 167). Tyler is not only Joe’s alter ego, but also a version of Joe that is smarter, braver, more charismatic, and a leader. Tyler is also the one who has been wreaking havoc all over the country through Project Mayhem, and he has ordered a number of killings to take place without any remorse. Accordingly, even though Tyler and Joe are technically the same person, this information is revealed towards the end of the narrative, and the characters’ personalities could not be more different. Consequently, my discussions surrounding the characters and their actions will be such that Tyler and Joe are separate individuals. This choice is further substantiated by the events that occur towards the end of the novel, as Joe takes an active stance against Tyler and feels it is his responsibility to stop Tyler from causing more harm. The novel ends with Joe shooting himself (in order to destroy Tyler), but remaining alive, and Tyler no longer being there.

Despite the fact the *Fight Club* narrative highlights the use of transgressive BDSM in the Fight Club space, much of the literature tackling the homoerotic violence does not address the dynamics taking place in Fight Club in a manner nuanced enough to recognize the very existence of this BDSM. One reason for this is the fixation on what can be referred to as “authentically” queer dynamics—interactions that include explicit displays of same-sex romance and/or sexual relations. When it comes to sex, Evan Omerso mentions that the Fight Club space taunts its audience with dynamics that are homoerotic, but not homosexual (52). Steven Allen, on the other hand, mentions that, in the case of Fight Club, “it is not that homosexuality is beaten back; rather that BDSM is beaten into the open,” (158). Even though I agree with Allen, my argument

follows a different framework to that of the author. I believe the situation with the homoerotic violence in *Fight Club* is not either-or; homosexuality is not on one end of the spectrum, and BDSM is not on the other. I argue that the body practices in the space are automatically queer—no matter the presence or absence of homosexual or homoromantic activity—through their use of BDSM, as queer sexuality inherently defies heteronormativity, and BDSM is, by this definition, queer. In doing so, I also question Marika Nováková's argument, as the author discusses transgressive sex in *Fight Club* without taking into consideration the BDSM in *Fight Club*. As such, I aim to highlight just how transgressive BDSM sexuality is and, more specifically, how its use in *Fight Club* allows for a truly radical expression of sexuality that goes beyond societal norms relating to desire and pleasure.

Similar to critics' views of *Fight Club* as lacking when it comes to “clear” representations of homosexuality, the narrative is also critiqued for presenting audiences with dynamics that are perceivably not homoromantic enough. This opinion is shared by Omerso (64, 74) and Thomas Peele (865), each of whom point out the narrative's lack of commitment to full-fledged gay relationships. However, had the authors taken a closer look at BDSM-oriented relationships emerging within the *Fight Club* space, they would have noticed that even though the relationships between the narrative's male fighters are not explicitly gay in terms of romance, they most certainly do not follow normative relationship structures. By utilizing Elizabeth Brake's discussions on romantic love and friendship, I prove that the BDSM dynamics within *Fight Club* transgress patriarchally heterocapitalist relationship norms and, subsequently, render the types of relationships between *Fight Club* fighters as queer.

Another reason why the transgressive BDSM utilized in *Fight Club* has been rendered invisible vis-a-vis critics is because of the debate on extreme violence. Omerso (54) and Henry Giroux (261-272) each take issue with the violence used in the *Fight Club* space, as they claim that this violence is inherently problematic due to its proximity to stereotypical masculinity. Even when other critics—Amirhossein Vafa and Rosli Talif (passim), and Lynn Ta (passim)—do not problematize the violence used in the *Fight Club* space, they still relate this violence to a type of wounded masculinity and do not recognize its transgressive potential. My thesis, on the other hand, does not focus on the relationship between violence and masculinity. Instead, I align my argument with that of Allen (158-161) and Olivia Burges (267-268), each of whom differentiate between consensual violence and non-consensual violence, and, consequently view the consensual violence in *Fight Club* as radical instead of as problematic and harmful. I expand the claims made by these authors by discussing the nuances between (what I refer to as) “good violence”—used in *Fight Club*—and “bad violence”—used in dynamics of intimacy outside of *Fight Club*—and highlighting how BDSM typically uses good violence, while systemic injustice and power imbalance utilize bad violence.

B. Definitions and Thesis Structure

Before discussing my thesis progression, I believe it is necessary to provide theoretical background on BDSM in order to justify my choice of the term in describing actions taking place in *Fight Club*. As stated by Steve Lenius, “[BDSM is] a four-letter acronym that stands for six words. BD stands for ‘bondage and discipline’; DS stands for ‘dominance and submission’; and SM stands for ‘sadism and masochism’,” (71-72). Historically speaking, variations of the term “SM”—S/M, S&M—have been used to describe body practices related to sadomasochism (Kao, 4-5), which is

a relationship giving rise to the sexual interaction of two or more people via a ritual whose outward appearance involves coercion, pain, restriction or suffering of some kind but which has been agreed upon, tacitly or overtly, between the parties concerned and may in reality involve none of these constraints. (Gosselin and Wilson qtd. in Howells 93)

Even though I believe that the men in *Fight Club* partake in acts that coincide the aforementioned description of SM—the consensual infliction and receiving of pain for erotic gratification—I am choosing to use the term “BDSM” since it has become the standard term for describing any type of BDSM activity in contemporary writing (Langdridge and Barker, 7). As such, I find Andrea Beckmann’s definition of BDSM to be particularly useful, as the author uses BDSM as an umbrella term describing “a complex of sexual desires, identities, and conducts that are related to bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, and sadism/masochism,” (5).

Now that I have clarified the reasoning behind my use of the term “BDSM” to describe the actions taking place in *Fight Club*, I will be detailing the content and evolution of each of the chapters following this first introductory chapter. Throughout my second chapter, I argue that the bodily practices exhibited in the *Fight Club* space highlight the use of transgressive BDSM. I focus on representations of sex, pleasure, and desire within the *Fight Club* space in order to prove that radical BDSM defines the homoerotic violence taking place within the space. More specifically, by discussing primarily heteronormative ideals surrounding eroticism and sex—moderation, reproduction, genital orientation, and privacy—the queer nature of the BDSM in *Fight Club* is brought to the surface.

In my third chapter, I focus on interpersonal dynamics. I argue that the *Fight Club* community functions as a transgressive BDSM community promoting ideals that go against patriarchal heterocapitalism. Firstly, I focus on the fluid nature of BDSM

relationships within Fight Club in order to highlight their lack of adherence to patriarchal heterocapitalist relationship norms. Next, I show how the type of care provided within the Fight Club is “alternative care” that typically exists in BDSM communities and, subsequently, goes against heteropatriarchal understandings of (lack of) care. Afterwards, I distinguish between what I refer to as “good violence” and “bad violence” in order to highlight the difference between non-consensual power imbalance and abuse outside of the Fight Club space, and radically consensual violence in Fight Club.

Finally, my conclusion includes a discussion of the halting of BDSM in the *Fight Club* narrative, as I believe that BDSM only exists in the novel through the Fight Club space, and not through the actions of Project Mayhem. As such, I highlight the progression of BDSM throughout *Fight Club*, as I believe the narrative presents audiences with dynamics that start off as radically transgressive, but ultimately end up as abusive through the readoption of problematic social norms.

I believe such a conclusion is necessary for reinforcing the argument made throughout my dissertation: it is necessary to apply a more nuanced understanding of the homoerotic violence that takes place in *Fight Club*—and, more specifically, in the Fight Club space—in order to recognize that the bodily practices and community formation taking place within Fight Club are radical in their use of BDSM that subverts heterocapitalist and heteropatriarchal norms.

CHAPTER II

QUEER EROTICS: GOING AGAINST THE HETERONORMATIVE GRAIN

A. Background and Theoretical Framework

Throughout this chapter, I argue that the erotic activity taking place in Fight Club can be considered queer through its use of BDSM that transgresses a number of ideals—moderation, reproduction, genitality, and privacy—surrounding heteronormative sex, pleasure, and desire. I compare how sex, pleasure, and desire function inside and outside the Fight Club space in order to designate the type of activity taking place in this space as anti-heteronormative and, consequently, queer.

Firstly, however, a theoretical explanation is required in order to elaborate on the framework I follow—that which equates BDSM activity to queer activity. RDK Herman mentions that BDSM identity “positions one outside the norm and into a realm popularly represented as ‘perverse’,” (92). This is because when the construction of sexuality began in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the discourse surrounding nonnormative sexualities—such as BDSM—emerged along with the social category of the “pervert” (Beckmann, 35). Furthermore, Beckmann states, “the ‘somasochist’ is therefore a mere supplement, functioning to define and stabilize the ‘heterosexual’ and his/her identity,” (37). This is because the further away sexual and/or erotic activity is from “normal coitus”—i.e. heterosexual sex completed quickly and effectively—the more it is considered perverse (ibid, 36). As such, this highlights how BDSM can be understood as diametrically opposed to heteronormativity, and this is what I believe allows BDSM to be identified as a practice of queerness. Such a framework is also

utilized by Charlotta Carlström and Catrine Andersson, who describe the spaces of BDSM as “queer” because they subvert “[hetero]normative ideals of sex and relationships,” (16). Accordingly, I identify BDSM as a practice of queerness through its antithetical relationship with heteronormativity.

The use of this framework is significant considering how the literature surrounding *Fight Club* has reductively addressed the eroticism taking place within the Fight Club space. In discussing the novel, Omerso mentions that the narrative represents “postgay” fiction: fiction that distances itself from “explicitly gay subject matter” in a time when gayness is no longer of much importance and when the “gay” label is considered outdated and unnecessary (13). The postgay time period emerged, according to Omerso, after the “end” of the AIDS crisis, which produced gay cultural trauma (11). As such, Omerso argues that *Fight Club* flirts with queer potential without fully realizing it (61). Speaking specifically of the dynamics in Fight Club, the author mentions that even though the activity taking place is homoerotic, sex—as it is normatively understood—is not on the agenda for Fight Club members, and this renders the Fight Club space as one that conjures up queer pasts without offering audiences visibly gay subject matter. The issue with this understanding of Fight Club is that it problematically dismisses the activity taking place in the space as not “gay enough”. Peele follows a similar logic when asking about the original Fight Club participants—Joe and Tyler—“what are we to make of a man who desires another man sexually but is not gay?” (865).

The framework I follow, on the other hand, does not focus on how overtly homosexual erotic activity is. Allen is of a similar opinion, as the author, in discussing

Fincher's cinematic adaptation of the book, mentions that critics often take note of the masochism present in the film without acknowledging its sexual—or, rather, erotic—undertones (154). In fact, in critiquing Robert Alan Brookey and Robert Westerfelhaus who, like Omerso, believe that the erotic violence in *Fight Club* neutralizes (and even negates) homoerotic potential (28-29), Allen writes,

if they had moved on to examine the next rule, namely 'Someone yells stop, goes limp, taps out; the fight is over', they would have discovered that BDSM is the sexual activity inscribed into the play. Consent is on the agenda (as in all play), but like the safe words of a BDSM 'scene', contestants can tap out at any time. It is not that the homosexuality is beaten back; rather the BDSM is beaten into the open. (158)

My understanding of the dynamics taking place in *Fight Club* mirrors that of Allen, albeit following a different framework. I believe questions such as, "is it gay or is it not?" and, "just how gay is it?" are neither productive nor nuanced enough to dissect the eroticism taking place within *Fight Club*. It is true that, as Allen mentions, BDSM is rendered extremely transparent in the case of *Fight Club*. This BDSM, I argue, is queer in its use of erotic practices that transgress heteronormative ideals of pleasure and desire. As such, I call for a framework that does not use a heterosexual-homosexual "spectrum" while examining the erotic activity in *Fight Club*, as this ignores the inherently queer nature of BDSM activity in *Fight Club* space and, consequently, how radical this BDSM is.

B. Discussion

As previously mentioned, I compare erotic activity occurring inside and outside *Fight Club* in order to highlight how the use of BDSM within this space queers heteronormative ideals of sex, desire, and pleasure. I focus on specifically on four ideals: moderation, reproduction, genitality, and privacy.

When it comes to the relationship between Fight Club, BDSM, and the heteronormative ideal of “moderation,” it is first necessary to define this ideal. Robin Bauer draws a direct link between heteronormativity and moderate sex: sex that does not include “anything that may be thought of as unpleasant emotions or sensations, such as pain, humiliation, shame or discomfort,” (3). As such, it can be said that one of the conditions for moderate sex is that it be devoid of physical violence, as this can be conducive to a myriad of “negative” feelings. This type of sex can be noticed outside the Fight Club space, as the most recurrent heterosexual intercourse—that between Tyler and Marla—is described as being of minimal violence. The most “harm” that either of the partners experiences comes in the form of hickies. These hickies, however, are taken for granted as naturally-occurring. When Joe sees the hickies on Tyler’s neck and chest, he is not surprised by the minute violence that Tyler endures (Palahniuk, 58-59). This highlights how moderate the sex between Tyler and Marla is.

When it comes to the erotic activity in Fight Club, on the other hand, the stakes are much higher. The very first BDSM encounter between Tyler and Joe—which ultimately leads to the creation of Fight Club—highlights a different degree of erotic violence, one that requires its participants to come to terms with what they are about to do. Palahniuk writes,

When we invented fight club, Tyler and I, neither of us had ever been in a fight before. If you’ve never been in a fight, you wonder. About getting hurt, about what you’re capable of doing against another man. I was the first guy Tyler ever felt safe enough to ask, and we were both drunk in a bar where no one would care so Tyler said, ‘I want you to do me a favor. I want you to hit me as hard as you can.’ [...] I looked around and said, okay. Okay, I say, but outside in the parking lot. So we went outside, and I asked if Tyler wanted it in the face or in the stomach. (51-52)

What is first noticeable about this encounter is how erotically it reads, as Palahniuk describes a situation rife with nervousness, excitement, and desire. In fact, the nervousness is so apparent that the men need to be intoxicated enough for their inhibitions to be so lowered that they completely give into their desire for intimacy. However, the type of intimacy Tyler and Joe seek is one that does not fit heteronormative understandings of sex and desire. What the characters wonder about is an exchange of violence—and, subsequently, pain—against another man. This exchange, nonetheless, is still rife with sensuality, as Palahniuk writes,

we both stood there, Tyler rubbing the side of his neck and me holding a hand on my chest, both of us knowing we'd gotten somewhere we'd never been and like the cat and mouse in cartoons, we were still alive and wanted to see how far we could take this thing and still be alive. (53)

This highlights how Joe and Tyler—and, later, everyone in Fight Club—wholeheartedly welcomes the experience of erotic violence, so much so that the men are willing to reach their physical breaking points during their encounters. The sensual dynamics in Fight Club are as far away from moderation as it gets, as the club's participants propel themselves into a world of pain with little to no hesitation.

Therefore, when Omerso denounces Fight Club as not queer enough because “the sex is replaced by violence,” (53) this is entirely untrue. To differentiate between sex and violence is inaccurate, as it supposes that “correct” sex is moderate. Ying-Chao Kao mentions, “S&M practitioners intersubjectively “key” (transcribe) violent fighting into sexual power plays,” (17). As such, it would be extremely reductive to place sex and violence in binary opposition to one another when, as with BDSM, this is not the case. Hence, it can be said that Fight Club's use of BDSM—and, more specifically, violence and pain—queers the heteronormative ideal of erotic moderation.

The second heteronormative ideal that *Fight Club* sexuality transgresses is that of reproduction. As such, it is necessary to discuss the capitalist origins of the relationship between reproduction and heterosexuality. Bekmann mentions that “normal” sexuality is centered around the construct of the nuclear family, which depends on the standardization of heterosexuality (33). This procreation-oriented sexuality is especially reinforced under patriarchal capitalism, according to Benjamin Ryo Ogawa, and pleasure is only celebrated when it ends in reproduction and satisfies the ideal of reproductive futurism (2). Celeste Pietrusza states that this ideal promotes “solely futuristic notions of ‘the Good’ as situated in the figure of the Child,” (20).

Reproductive futurism—and its relationship to capitalism—can be very clearly noticed outside of the *Fight Club* space, as the sole purpose of couple formation seems to be the endless production of offspring and, consequently, laborers. Palahniuk writes, “my dad, he starts a new family in a new town about every six years. This isn’t so much like a family as it’s like he sets up a franchise,” (50). Another example occurs when Marla first has sex with Tyler. As described in the novel, “after Tyler and Marla had sex about ten times, Tyler says, Marla said she wanted to get pregnant. Marla said she wanted to have Tyler’s abortion,” (ibid, 59). Even though readers earlier find out that the couple used a condom (ibid, 56), the sex is still framed as either conducive of reproduction or of terminated reproduction —abortion. As such, it is very clear that sex outside of *Fight Club* aims at reinforcing reproductive—and, consequently, hetero-capitalist—ideals.

When it comes to erotic activity inside the *Fight Club* space, on the other hand, reproductive focus is transgressed through the use of BDSM. Even though *Fight Club*

activities occur strictly between men—and, therefore, automatically cease the possibility of reproduction—the use of BDSM is nevertheless important, as its practices also (albeit differently) stand against the heteronormative ideal of reproduction. Jeremy Carrette mentions, “S&M is a psychosexual discourse that operates in modern capitalistic societies as a transgressive subcultural form of resistance to hegemonic sexual practices—in so far as it identifies pleasure outside the procreative act,” (14). Furthermore, Ogawa highlights the radical impact behind the use of BDSM as a means of achieving pleasure. The author states that pleasure is typically only encouraged as a means of reproduction and, accordingly, an appropriate resistance against this is the “vast multiplying of pleasure beyond its productive forms” through a practice such as BDSM (1-2).

The men of Fight Club do just this: they meet every Saturday in order to partake in high-pleasure erotic violence. After “tapping” a guy, Joe engages in a fight with a man that ends with the former’s mouth in a “big O” (Palahniuk, 51). Reflecting on his fight, Joe mentions that “you aren’t alive anywhere like you’re alive at fight club” and describes grunting in the form of “hysterical shouting in tongues like at church” after which the men of Fight Club feel “saved” (ibid, 50-51). The type of activity described in Fight Club takes on an especially erotic quality when considering the terminology used by Palahniuk: a “big O” could be symbolic of orgasm, “hysterical shouting” could indicate moans, and the entire experience of feeling “saved” could point to the endless amount of pleasure produced within the Fight Club space.

Moreover, Palahniuk writes, “after you've been to fight club, watching football on television is watching pornography when you could be having great sex,” (50). Even

though the explicit intent behind the aforementioned statement is to compare the non-commercial, real fighting that occurs in *Fight Club* to the impersonal fighting that occurs between football players on TV, it does not seem accidental that the comparison is made using references to highly erotic experiences. Palahniuk compares the *Fight Club* experience to that of having not just sex, but great sex. This is indicative of how pleasure-oriented the *Fight Club* lifestyle is, as the men within the collective repeatedly partake in practices that are erotically proximate to great sex. As such, it can be said that the men of *Fight Club* succeed at queering the hetero-capitalist imperative for ongoing reproduction through the experience of BDSM, as they participate in acts of erotic pleasure for the sake of pleasure itself.

Similar to how *Fight Club* presents audiences with a narrative that queers the hetero-reproductive ideal, the space also radically opposes hetero-genital fixation through the use of BDSM. In order to clarify this point, I will first be discussing the relationship between heteronormativity and genitally-oriented sex. Beckmann mentions that because socially constructed sexuality is biologically driven and aims at reproduction, society is fixated on hetero-genital sex, as it is the only means by which reproduction can occur efficiently and quickly (26-33). As such, it can be said that heteronormative sex is of a profoundly genital nature.

When it comes to sex within *Fight Club*—outside the *Fight Club* space—representations of eroticism are highly genital. One example of this is when Tyler splices “this frame of a lunging red penis or a yawning wet vagina closeup into another feature movie,” (Palahniuk, 30). This splicing occurs several times throughout the novel, as Tyler is so immensely bored and frustrated with his sub-par, repetitive

projectionist job, that he seeks to wreak havoc by inserting single-frame images of either genitals and/or overt sexual practices—“pornography. Sodomy. Fellatio. Cunnilingus,”—into the films he is projecting (Palahniuk, 113). Moreover, as previously mentioned, when describing the most frequent heterosexual interaction in the novel—that between Marla and Tyler—Palahniuk describes a genitally-focused encounter, as the pair have sex ten times, and Marla’s goal is either to get pregnant, or to have Tyler’s abortion (59), both of which imply genitally-oriented intercourse. Consequently, the examples above highlight how hetero-genitally oriented sexuality outside of *Fight Club* truly is.

In opposition, *Fight Club* presents audiences with an erotic narrative that queers heteronormative ideals through the use of BDSM. Marianna Mdzeluri states that BDSM subverts heteronormative sexual ideals by moving away from genitally-focused encounters (12). Similarly, Beckmann mentions that it is typical of consensual SM practices to assign erotic value to body parts that are not considered inherently sexual—i.e. non-genital body parts (169). This can be very clearly noticed in the *Fight Club* space, as genitals—the way they are normatively understood—are not involved in the erotic play between *Fight Club*’s participants, and certain non-genital and/or non-erogenous areas of the body are eroticized. Palahniuk makes three references to the “butthole” (98, 115, 135) that had formed on Joe’s cheek as a result of having his face, “rammed [...] into the concrete floor until [his] teeth bit open the inside of [his] cheek,” (ibid, 50). As such, genital and/or typically erogenous orifices become replaced with areas that are not inherently sexual—cheeks.

Another example of this can be noticed when Palahniuk describes the inception of *Fight Club*—the fight between Joe and Tyler. The author writes, “so we went outside, and I asked if Tyler wanted it in the face or in the stomach,” (52). Such a question can be very easily interpreted as erotically oriented and, consequently, punches to the face and the stomach point to the occurrence of a non-normative type of penetration. As such, instead of normative sexual encounters where the focus is solely on genital locations, erotic interactions in *Fight Club* transform “neutral” bodily locations into areas of erotic possibility, thereby transgressing—and queering—heteronormative sexual ideals.

A fourth manner by which the eroticism taking place in *Fight Club* queers heteronormative sexual ideals is through its choice of location: the semi-public bar space—which is a space typically associated with queer BDSM. In order to highlight the significance of the use of the underground bar as a means of queer transgression, it is first necessary to examine how sex outside of *Fight Club* functions. A defining characteristic of the sexual activity taking place outside of *Fight Club* is its privacy. This is especially relevant when considering the relationship between heteronormative sex and the domestic as a private space. Herman writes “the home is the ‘normal’ place for sexual activity as defined in the heterosexual model of domestic procreation,” (95). In *Fight Club*, the most frequent overt heterosexual activity—i.e. the sex between Marla and Tyler—occurs within the domestic: Tyler’s home on Paper Street (Palahniuk, 62). As such, erotic activity outside the *Fight Club* space presents audiences with a model of sex that is highly heteronormative in its adherence to to privacy.

On the other hand, the erotic activity between *Fight Club* participants occurs within a semi-public space typically associated with queer BDSM—the bar space. This location is especially radical considering the general relationship between BDSM and sexually transgressive spaces. Herman mentions that sexually transgressive spaces exist in two ways: they are either entirely separate from normative sexual spaces (ex. red-light districts and gay villages), or they are semi-public (and, consequently, semi-private) spaces that “operate within the interstices of society,” (94). The latter spaces “disrupt dominant geographies of heterosexuality by creating transitory sites for sexual freedom and pleasure where the immoral is moral and the perverse is normal,” (ibid, 94). According to Herman, it is expected that BDSM activities would occur within these in-between spaces; however, most BDSM actually occurs within the home, and rooms are modified in order to accommodate kink-related activities (95). Nevertheless, to say that all BDSM spaces are inherently heteronormative spaces would be inaccurate, especially considering the cultural significance of the bar as a queer BDSM space.

This ties back to “leather bars,” which emerged with the rise of leather culture and leather men. These men were gay military personnel who, after serving during the second world war and coming back to the U.S., needed a new space to congregate and be themselves, as the military space was no longer an option (Barrett, 185). The bar was identified as a space where these men could engage in BDSM that utilizes leather as an “indexical [marker] of masculinity during an era when the prevailing ideology assumed that gay men were naturally feminine, (ibid, 185). Leather culture transformed the BDSM landscape in that it designated a particular space for gay men to assemble, and this space became the “it” space for generations to come. This does not mean that all gay BDSM occurs in leather bars, but rather that the bar within the context of gay

BDSM, holds a particular cultural significance as a space of sexual freedom and transgression.

As such, leather bars can be categorized as transgressive spaces within—and not outside of—society where queer BDSM—and, consequently, immoral and perverse—activity can take place. Phil Hubbard and Teela Sanders would categorize the leather bar space as a liminal space that disrupts heterosexual geographies, as it is a semi-public (and/or semi-private) space that has been repurposed for sexually transgressive reasons. Similarly, the Fight Club bar space is not only a queer space, but a typically queer BDSM space. Like the leather bar space, it is a liminal space between the public and the private where homoerotic violence takes place. The Fight Club space takes it a step further, however, as it occurs in the basement of a bar (Palahniuk, 50). This is a liminal space within a liminal space, as even though the basement space is underground, it is still open to anyone with access to the bar.

Moreover, in the novel, Joe describes the Fight Club space as an ever-expanding one in terms of population: “after the bar closes on Saturday night, and every week you go and there’s more guys there,” (Palahniuk, 49). As such, the Fight Club space is profoundly semi-public (and, consequently, semi-private), as it occurs within a perimeter that is both closed and open. Furthermore, the space is a queer space not only through its use of a spatial signifier (the bar) associated with queer BDSM, but also through its existence as an arena of public-private liminality where non-normative sensual activity takes place.

C. Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to call for a more queer-focused understanding of the erotic dynamics taking place in *Fight Club*. Throughout this chapter, I highlighted components of the *Fight Club* practice that very clearly allow for it to be identified as BDSM and, consequently, as queer sexuality. It is very strange, then, that *Fight Club*'s radical rejection of heteronormative sexuality (through BDSM) has been so easily dismissed by critics. In her discussion of transgressive sex in Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, Nováková does not mention the dynamics taking place in the *Fight Club* space. This is surprising considering the author's discussion of sex in transgressive fiction—fiction whose aim is to “violate—norms, humanity, and body,” (8). Nováková mentions that the successful employment of sex in transgressive fiction requires that the sex itself be “against standards,” (19-20). By utilizing BDSM in its practices, *Fight Club* very clearly presents audiences with a sexually-transgressive narrative that, indeed, goes against standards. However, it is perhaps this very reason that sexuality in *Fight Club* has been overlooked. Sex in *Fight Club* does not look anything like sex normally would. It is immoderate, non-reproductive, non-genital, and semi-public and, consequently, as far away from heteronormative sex as it can get. This is precisely why the dynamics in *Fight Club* require the employment of a nuanced understanding of queer erotic practice, as a heteronormative lens does not work when it comes to recognizing sexual practices as radically transgressive BDSM.

CHAPTER III

RADICAL COMMUNITIES: RESTRUCTURING FRIENDSHIP, CARE, AND VIOLENCE

Throughout this chapter, I dissect interpersonal dynamics occurring within Fight Club in order to prove that it primarily functions as a BDSM—and, therefore, queer—community and, subsequently, that such a community requires an ethos antithetical to patriarchal heterocapitalism in order to function properly and sustainably. Firstly, I explain how the types of BDSM relationships that emerge within the Fight Club space are fluid in nature, as they do not conform to the heterocapitalist ideal of the stable couple, and they describe a play partner dynamic. Secondly, I examine the interactions between Fight Club members in order to highlight the value of BDSM-focused alternative care and, subsequently, how transgressive this care is. Finally, after discussing the difference between what I refer to as “good violence” and “bad violence,” I argue that the type of BDSM-oriented violence that exists within the Fight Club space is radical in its consensuality, and this stands in stark contrast with the everyday heteropatriarchal violence outside of Fight Club.

A. Queer Organizing: Radically Fluid Relationships

As previously mentioned, throughout the following portion of text, I argue that BDSM dynamics within Fight Club are non-normative in that they evade any type of fixed “label” and, consequently, transgress heterocapitalist ways of understanding relationships. The literature discussing relationship formation in *Fight Club* points to a lack of commitment to queer content, as demonstrated by the perplexing pseudo-romantic dynamic between Fight Club’s creators, Tyler and Joe. Peele writes, “that Jack

loves and desires Tyler Durden is clear; that Jack is not gay also seems clear. What are we to make of a man who desires another man [...] but is not gay?," (865). Similarly, Omerso mentions that Palahniuk's novel flirts with homo-romantic relationships, but the narrative fails at bringing them out into the open (64, 74). The problem with such critiques is their focus on the degree of "authenticity" behind the queerness of character dynamics. Accordingly, texts like those of Omerso and Peele do not recognize the radical potential behind the type of queer community formation that emerges within *Fight Club* through the use of BDSM. By trying to estimate how gay (or not) the dynamic between Joe and Tyler is, Omerso and Peele problematically employ what Brake describes as "amatonormativity" and, consequently, fail to take note of the queerness present in the relationship between *Fight Club* members.

Throughout the preceding section, I discuss what amatonormativity is, how it ties into heterocapitalism, and how using it as a means of delineating what is queer from what is not queer is problematic. As mentioned by Brake, amatonormativity assumes "that a central, exclusive, amorous relationship is normal for humans, in that it is a universally shared goal, and that such a relationship is normative, in that it should be aimed at in preference to other relationship types," (88-89). This ideal is heteronormative in nature, not in the sense where it only applies to heterosexual couples, but rather that it stems from a distinctly heterosexual culture that promotes dyadic romantic coupling over any other type of dynamic (Brake, 89).

Furthermore, the ideal of amatonormativity is complicit in promoting capitalism, as per Brake's discussion of marriage. Even though not every amatonormative coupling leads to marriage, it is reasonable to say the ideological foundation of marriage is amatonormativity. Brake writes,

amatonormativity wrongly privileges the central, dyadic, exclusive, enduring amorous relationship associated with, but not limited to, marriage. By “central,” I mean the relationship is prioritized by the partners over other relationships and projects. Such relationships tend to be characterized by sexual exclusivity, domesticity, and shared property. (90)

As such, it can be fairly stated that what applies to marriage applies to amatonormative coupling. Moreover, contemporary Marxism labels marriage as inherently capitalistic: it encourages the acquisition of private property, the exclusivity of partners over each other (thereby turning each partner into private property for their counterpart), and the economic alienation of family unit from the rest of the world (Brake, 129-130). Consequently, amatonormative coupling is also inherently capitalistic, and it can be said that the amatonormative couple structure is heterocapitalist in nature.

Therefore, when critics point to Tyler and Joe’s romantically perplexing dynamic to diagnose *Fight Club* as not-queer-enough, they employ an amatonormative—and, consequently, heterocapitalist—way of understanding interpersonal relationships. Had critics looked outside the pseudo-romantic confines of the Tyler-Joe dynamic, they would have taken note of the radical nature behind the *Fight Club* community. This community, as I argue, functions as a BDSM community that queers heterocapitalist understandings of relationship dynamics.

As previously highlighted, the *Fight Club* community, through its intersection with BDSM, queers heterocapitalist norms relating to relationship formation, specifically amatonormativity. This is achieved by means of promoting relationships that can be categorized as friendships (with a twist), which is radical within the *Fight Club* world, as friendship is of little value when compared to marriage. Palahniuk writes, “ever since college, I make friends. They get married. I lose friends,” (62). This is not surprising, as friendship does not serve any purpose within the novel’s overtly

heterocapitalist landscape. Similar to how sex and desire outside of *Fight Club* primarily serve reproductive purposes, relationships within Palahniuk's novel are valued according to how closely they fit the ideal of the stable couple and, subsequently, the reproductive family.

In another example, Palahniuk states, "when I got a job and turned twenty-five, long distance, I said, now what? My dad didn't know, so he said, get married. I'm a thirty-year-old boy and I'm wondering if another woman is really the answer I need," (50). Here, the relationship between capitalism and marriage is all too evident, as right after Joe gets a job, his father's one suggestion is that he marry, and Joe's value within the heterocapitalist marketplace drops—"I'm a thirty year-old boy"— simply because he chooses not to pursue marriage as an immediate goal. Brake mentions that a "significant social marker" of adulthood involves dating for marriage, and anyone who does not partake in dyadic amorous love is seen as "incomplete, immature, and irresponsible," (92-100). This is entirely the case with Joe who, in his failure to chase romantic love, is no longer an adult man, but a boy.

As such, *Fight Club* presents audiences with a perfect example of what Brake believes to be the perils of dyadic marriage and amorous partnerships:

[they] create the conditions for a separation of individuals from the community [and, instead of solving the issue of social disconnectedness, they] enable, not cure, the alleged pathology of contemporary American culture, the investment of the self in the private, at the cost of public, goods or public engagement. (87)

Even when married couples in the novel do have friends, the dynamic is represented as inauthentic, as Palahniuk writes, "she's tired, tired of all the people they call their friends," (50). This further highlights just how alienating marital coupling can be towards relationships outside the primary couple—friends, for example.

When it comes to *Fight Club*, on the other hand, the community operates much differently than that of the outside world, especially when it comes to friendship. Palahniuk writes, “a lot of best friends meet for the first time at fight club,” (54). These types of dynamics are not uncommon within the BDSM community, as Bauer mentions, “playing with friends has become so common in some BDSM community contexts that the mono-normative boundary between friends and lovers is rather fluid,” (129). This boundary is especially fluid between the narrative’s main protagonists: Tyler and Joe. As mentioned by Omerso (64, 74) and Peele (865), the pair often engage in homo-romantic interactions that never reach “completion”. In fact, the only clear identifier used to describe the relationship between the pair is “best friends,” (Palahniuk, 11). Although it is true that the dynamic between Tyler and Joe is unclear, this does not relegate the queerness in their relationship to a non-existent and/or failed status, especially when considering that BDSM relationships can be considered queer in their pursuit of non-heterocapitalist interpersonal interactions.

Carlström and Andersson mention that queer spaces consist of “place- and community-making practices that are closely connected to queer subjects, but not in an essential way,” (16). Moreover, the authors mention that the BDSM space is queer through its promotion of non-normative sexuality and relationships—regardless of the “actual” orientation of the participants of the BDSM space (ibid). As such, in pursuing eroticism-laden friendships, the men of *Fight Club* form a queer community that does not seek to reproduce the heterocapitalistic ideal of amatonormativity, as overt coupling is not a sought-after goal of the club, and the men are perfectly content being friends/best friends who engage in sensual power exchange. The situation with *Fight Club* is exactly as Allen mentions, “it is not that the homosexuality is beaten back;

rather the BDSM is beaten into the open,” (158). A closer inspection into BDSM culture and its forms of interpersonal expression would have indicated that, if a label were to be used to describe Fight Club participants (especially Tyler and Joe), it would be “play partners”.

Accordingly, in the following portion of this chapter section, I highlight four requirements of play partner dynamics—non-romantic relationship status, recurrence of play sessions, spatial and/or symbolic separation, and platonic non-monogamy—that I believe are very clearly met within the Fight Club community and, subsequently, that highlight just how radically-constructed relationships are within the Fight Club space, as they evade heterocapitalist relationship structures and further sway from the ideal of the amatonormative couple.

As defined by Bauer, a play partner relationship represents an intermediate dynamic between nonsexual friendship and romantic love wherein participants partake in BDSM sessions together. Furthermore, individuals are considered play partners under two conditions: they are not dating; they play together on a regular or semi-regular basis (141-142). This is entirely the case with Fight Club participants, as they are “best friends” (Palahniuk, 54)—not partners—who engage in acts of erotic violence with each other on a regular basis—every Saturday (Palahniuk, 52).

Moreover, the separation that exists between the Fight Club space—the underground bar basement—and other spaces highlights another aspect of the play partner relationship: “a spatial or symbolic separation between BDSM and ordinary life,” (Bauer, 141). Bauer mentions that a separation between BDSM life and everyday life may be used to keep play partner dynamics from entering relationship (i.e. amatonormative) territory, and this separation could exist in several forms including a

spatial differentiation and/or a differentiation of realities (142). This clear divide can be noticed with *Fight Club* in several ways. Firstly, as previously mentioned, the underground bar space acts as a geographical sequester where men engage in intimate acts of violence without being romantically involved with each other. This is especially the case with Tyler and Joe, who share a domestic space outside of *Fight Club*. Furthermore, reality is entirely shifted in *Fight Club*. Palahniuk writes, “who I am in *Fight Club* is not someone my boss knows. After a night in fight club, everything in the real world gets the volume turned down,” (49). In fact, the shift in realities is so intense that *Fight Club* obliterates any and all forms of identification existing outside the club. Palahniuk writes, “as long as you’re at fight club, you’re not how much money you’ve got in the bank. You’re not your job. You’re not your family, and you’re not who you tell yourself. [...] you’re not your name,” (143). Lines are so intensely demarcated that when certain members run into each other outside the club, they only nod to each other (ibid, 54). As such, it can be said that the requirement of symbolic separation described by Bauer is entirely met in the case of *Fight Club* participants.

Furthermore, a fourth element of play partner relationships that can be very clearly identified within *Fight Club* is non-monogamy. As mentioned by Bauer, “polyamory often involves particular philosophies of friendship, which stress the non-exclusive character of friendships as opposed to romantic relationships,” (30). In his discussion of BDSM dynamics between “dyke+queer” practitioners, Bauer mentions that the play occurring between members takes place in a non-exclusive manner that welcomes a multiplicity of dynamics and interactions, without the burden of adhering to the ideal of monogamy typically found in romantic relationships. He writes, “sexuality lost its special status in this sense, getting less burdened with the discursive baggage of

love and romance. Therefore, non-monogamy was considered to be a valid way to pursue one's sexual desires, analogous to enjoying one's hobbies with various friends with similar tastes," (129). Even though the author describes non-monogamous dynamics as occurring between the specific population—dyke+queer play partners—he was observing, the origin of the “sexual friendship circle” is actually gay male BDSM culture (Bauer, 132), so a comparison between Fight Club dynamics and play-partner dynamics is accurate.

As previously highlighted, relationships between Fight Club members are fluid in the sense where they engage in acts of erotic violence with each other without being in romantic (or even sexual) relationships with each other. The men in Fight Club are also not confined to one singular play partner to have play sessions with. A prime example of this is Joe, who first had Tyler as a play partner (Palahniuk, 52-53), then the guy Joe “tapped” (ibid, 50), and then other unspecified men. Moreover, another example includes two of the Fight Club rules: “only two guys to a fight. One fight at a time,” (ibid, 48). Even though the set-up of the fights is dyadic, it is not monogamous, as the men are not limited in terms of partner choice and can, therefore, partake in BDSM with anyone.

As such, the men of Fight Club can be said to engage in play partner dynamics that very clearly defy the ideal of monogamy demanded of individuals who typically partake in erotic activity together. This is significant in that it highlights just how queer interactions between Fight Club members really are, as Carlström and Andersson point to the inherent queerness present in BDSM through its use of “nonmonogamous patterns of intimacy” (14) that are also present within polyamorous communities. The author mentions that any space that includes activity that defies the ideals of the

monogamous, stable, and potentially reproductive couple can be considered a queer space, and since BDSM communities typically encourage exploration outside the framework of dyadic coupling—similar to polyamorous communities—they can be considered queer (ibid, 14). Accordingly, *Fight Club* relationships can very easily be considered queer, as they go against the heterocapitalist ideal of amatonormativity though their use of play partner dynamics typically present in BDSM.

This preceding section of text highlights a need for nuance when addressing the types of dynamics present in *Fight Club*, as critics have focused solely on “overt” expressions of queerness—or rather homosexuality—when diagnosing *Fight Club* dynamics and labeling them as queer-deficient. In fact, the most blatant accusation of intricately woven anti-gayness comes from Omerso, who mentions that Palahniuk “demonstrated a willingness to engage queer content, but evinces no devotion to it,” (61). This is because, according to Omerso, Palahniuk utilizes the “postgay wink,” which “combines a disavowal of sexual identity (or the authority of such categories to inform how we experience life) with a (perhaps involuntary) glance back toward all that may be represented by gay identity—community, vitality, self-actualization; stigma, shame, powerlessness,” (61).

There are several issues with the claims that Omerso is making, primarily that the type of community dynamics within *Fight Club* are not given their due diligence in terms of queer value. As previously highlighted, what is being brought into the open with *Fight Club* is BDSM and, consequently, the types of relationships present in *Fight Club*—best described as play-partnerships—are extremely radical in their refusal of heterocapitalist relationship ideals. Stuart Murray et al. mention that the BDSM community operates the way other marginalized groups do—by forming a number of

emotionally-driven assemblages that go against state-mandated ways of achieving interpersonal relationships (121). The Fight Club community acts entirely as described, as its participants form emotionally-intense assemblages that, in some cases, are formative of best friend relationships. These dynamics defy expectations pertaining to relationship formation, as they go against the heterocapitalist ideal of amatonormativity.

Even though Omerso does mention Fight Club's functioning as a homosocial community promoting intimacy (52-53), any positive and/or radical effect behind this community is not taken into consideration, and a particular aspect of the community's queer past is entirely disregarded. As has been highlighted, the Fight Club community is not just any type of community; it is one that defies heterocapitalistic relationship norms through its promotion of play partner dynamics and, subsequently, intimate friendships. Such dynamics originated in gay BDSM culture, as per Bauer (132), and friendship formation became a hallmark of gay BDSM culture. In fact, when considering gay BDSM culture, Foucault sees "new possibilities for community formation, particularly, in his analyses, in gay male homosexuality and homosociality," (Pietrusza, 47). As such, it can be said that through the use of homosocial BDSM, Palahniuk harkens back to a historically significant tradition within gay culture and does so very explicitly, as he presents audiences with a BDSM community that positively promotes alternative relationship dynamics. Accordingly, Omerso does the novel an injustice when he states that Palahniuk shies away from overtly gay subjects through the use of the postgay wink, as the use of homosocial BDSM is not only an explicit marker of gay male culture, but also a means by which heterocapitalistic dynamics are negated and replaced by a much more queer, much more genuine way of being.

B. Alternative Care: An Ethics of Mutual Understanding and Harm Reduction

In the following section of this chapter, I argue that the types of relationships present within the Fight Club space demonstrate a type of alternative care that is radical in its ability to minimize harm and encourage mutual understanding between the club's participants. By discussing the difference between (the lack of) care within a patriarchal heterocapitalist framework and care within a BDSM framework, I prove that the use of BDSM within the Fight Club space requires the employment of a particular type of care that ultimately leads to the construction of relationships built on mutual understanding and harm reduction.

Throughout the following portion of text, I highlight how care-deficient relationships outside the Fight Club space are, due primarily to their patriarchal heterocapitalist nature. As mentioned by Brake, it is taken for granted that marriage promotes care; however, this is sometimes not true (81). In fact, a number of marriages may involve "unidirectional caring" that is gendered and may result in the abuse of the female caregiver (ibid, 87). This is entirely the case when it comes to marriage as represented outside of the Fight Club space. An example used throughout earlier portions of this thesis is that of Joe's father, as he views marriages as baby-making institutions and, consequently, women as producers of progeny (Palahniuk, 50). Furthermore, Palahniuk writes, "my father always said, 'get married before the sex gets boring, or you'll never get married.' My mother said, 'never buy anything with a Nylon zipper'," (65). This example highlights how Joe's father almost entirely reduces women to sex objects, and how normatively Joe's mother fits her role as caregiver, as she gives her son advice that relates to the management of household products.

Accordingly, the lack of care in this relationship is made very evident, as Joe's father sees women only as sex objects and as lineage facilitators, and he abandons his wives and leaves them to caretaking entirely on their own. As mentioned by Brake,

Monogamous marriage allowed men to control reproduction and facilitated private property arrangements [...]. These charges illuminate the free lovers's complaint that marriage is not a good vehicle for passionate love: In their view, the institution is about property, including property in one's spouse, not love. In light of such critiques, suspicion arises that the belief in the moral value of marriage is merely ideological, a tool of patriarchal capitalism. (20)

This is entirely the case with dynamics outside of *Fight Club*, as marriages—and, as will be later discussed, heterosexual relationships—are seen as primarily benefiting men who utilize their wives for re(productive) purposes. As such, marital dynamics in *Fight Club* perfectly exemplify a salient point that Brake makes: marriage can, under non-egalitarian circumstances, become “a tool of sexism, heterosexism, and capitalism,” (9).

As previously highlighted, *Fight Club* presents audiences with care-deficient marital dynamics that are a result of patriarchal heterocapitalist norms for coupling. In the previous paragraph, the example of Joe's father and mother is used. This, however, is not the only example in the novel, as the dynamic between Tyler and Marla is particularly lacking in care. More specifically, it can be said that Tyler treats Marla—his temporary “romantic” counterpart—as an object for sex and capitalistic gain. Firstly, there exists a very clear romantic asymmetry between the pair, as Marla seems to share genuine feelings for Tyler (Palahniuk, 159), but the latter doesn't feel the same at all and goes as far as saying “don't call this *love*,” (ibid, 62). Furthermore, when discussing the sex between the two, Tyler says, “Marla is some twisted bitch, but [I] like that a lot,” (ibid, 59). This sets the precedent for much of the dynamic between Tyler and Marla, as he seems to be interested in her mostly for sexual reasons, while she shares

feelings for him. The problem with this asymmetry is not its existence, but rather that Tyler is aware of Marla's sentiments and still chooses to treat her only as a sex object. This highlights just how little care Tyler directs towards Marla.

Secondly, when it comes to financial gain, Tyler non-consensually uses Marla in order to generate profit via a soap-selling business. Palahniuk writes of an incident when Marla stores a container holding a significant amount of her mother's fat—30 pounds—in Joe and Tyler's freezer. This fat is initially extracted for its collagen, as both Marla and her mother aim to partake in plastic surgery that utilizes this collagen (90-91). Instead of leaving the collagen container as is, Tyler decides to utilize the collagen in order to improve the quality of the soap he and Joe were producing and, as Tyler hoped, sell more soap. He not only uses Marla's belongings without her permission—and for an entirely profit-driven purpose—but he does so with very little sense of remorse, as he repeats three times that the situation with Marla's mother's collagen could have been worse (*ibid*, 86-90). Upon finding out what had happened with her mother's fat, Marla is extremely hurt, and she describes her mother as having been boiled (*ibid*, 93). The fact that Marla uses such language—“you boiled my mother!” (*ibid*, 93)—indicates how personally she views the assault on her mother's fat and, consequently, just how uncaringly Tyler acted towards her. Accordingly, it is no surprise that Nováková describes the latter as having been emotionally abusive towards Marla (59), as he both violates her trust and treats her like nothing more than a sex object. As such, the dynamic is extremely care-deficient towards Marla.

The situation with *Fight Club*, on the other hand, presents an entirely different narrative. Through the use of BDSM, dynamics in *Fight Club* ensure mutual understanding and harm reduction—and, consequently, proper care—between club

members. One way that this takes place within BDSM—and, subsequently, within Fight Club—is through communication. According to Lisa Rivoli, “communication is an unavoidable part of safe, sane, and consensual BDSM; partners have no choice but to talk to each other, sharing desires, fantasies, and limits, negotiating a scene beforehand, and debriefing it afterwards,” (27). More specifically, what makes communication extremely vital to the practice of BDSM is the process of negotiation, as this is what makes acts occurring within BDSM consensual (Franklin-Reible, 68). Clear communication—and, accordingly, negotiation—takes place from the very first BDSM interaction between Joe and Tyler—which, ultimately, leads to the birth of Fight Club.

During that first fight, Joe asks Tyler where exactly he would like to be hit. Afterwards, the pair communicate throughout a significant portion of the encounter, until they are able to determine what is enjoyable for both themselves and establish a rhythm they are both comfortable with (Palahniuk, 52-53). A second example of proper communication between Fight Club participants takes place at the end of Joe’s fight with one of the participants. After the men shake hands, Joe is asked whether he would like to repeat the fight with the same man a week later, to which Joe semi-jokingly says, “how about next month?” (ibid, 51). Even though Joe’s response is half-serious, his answer indicates a very clear setting of boundaries and an admission that he may not be able to handle another fight with the same man in such a short period of time. As such, Fight Club members are able to communicate effectively with each other, as they recognize and vocalize personal desires and limits, and they are receptive to the needs of others. This ensures mutual understanding and harm reduction within Fight Club dynamics and, consequently, indicates a certain level of care between participants, as they are all interested in both their own and each other’s best interest.

A second means by which mutual understanding and harm reduction takes place in *Fight Club* is through the use of safe words, a standard practice in BDSM. Rivoli states, “a safe word is a designated word that will only be spoken if one of the participants wants to stop a scene. [...] This occurs if a person becomes uncomfortable or injured,” (21-22). When it comes to *Fight Club*, a safe word exists not to prevent injury, but rather to make sure that the aggression between the participants does not reach a point of genuine dissatisfaction for either or both of the fighters. Palahniuk writes, “that’s the third rule in fight club, when someone says stop, or goes limp, even if he’s just faking it, the fight is over,” (48). The safe word is used twice throughout the novel (ibid, 48-51), indicating that fighters know their limits and respect each other’s boundaries. Accordingly, when *Fight Club* members agree to joining the club and adhering to its rules, they inadvertently agree to a commitment of safety between participants and, consequently, an ethics of mutual understanding and harm reduction.

In conclusion, it can be said that dynamics within *Fight Club* effectively promote what Brake would consider “morally-educated” care, while the dynamics outside of *Fight Club*—Joe’s parents, and Marla and Tyler—fail at ensuring said care. Brake mentions that morally-educated care is a type of care that “entails wanting justice for the other,” (104). This type of care is clearly present within BDSM communities, as they prioritize justice by means of “shared rules, values and norms that members must adhere to,” (Carlström and Andersson, 405). Members of BDSM clubs, like *Fight Club*, know what they’re signing up for, and they acknowledge and respect the need for interpersonal care by obeying club rules. When it comes to the hetero-romantic dynamics discussed earlier in this chapter section, the situation is very different, as gender-informed justice is clearly not on the agenda. Joe’s mother and Marla suffer at

the hands of their male counterparts, as Joe's father and Tyler do not treat their partners with care, instead choosing to focus on sexual and economic gratification. As such, the types of dynamics present within Fight Club are radical in that they ensure the emotional and physical wellbeing of Fight Club members and, consequently, achieve morally-educated care.

C. Bad Violence vs. Good Violence: A Diagnosis of Power and Equality

Throughout the previous two sections of this chapter, I highlighted how community formation and methods of care differ within the Fight Club universe, as they do not follow heterocapitalist relationship norms. Instead, Fight Club participants form a community of play partners that utilize alternative modes of care in order to build genuine relationship dynamics. Similarly, Fight Club presents readers with a narrative of violence that is non-normative in its approach towards interpersonal relations. In the following section of this chapter, I argue that Fight Club implements what I refer to as “good violence”—a type of violence that is consented upon and that promotes well-being—whereas the larger *Fight Club* community partakes in “bad violence,”—a type of violence that stems from and reinforces problematic heteropatriarchal values. I first explain the difference between bad violence and good violence, then I describe how hetero-romantic dyads in *Fight Club* partake in bad violence, and, finally, I describe how the men of Fight Club use three key principles—safe, sane, and consensual—in order to partake in good violence.

Violence in the Fight Club space has been a topic of much debate in the scholarly literature. Firstly, much of the texts discussing Fight Club problematize the violence used in the space by relating it to normative—harmful—masculinity. Omerso,

for instance, mentions, “in Palahniuk’s framework, the sex is replaced by violence, and homosexuality is replaced by heroic, “all-man” masculinity,” (52). A second example is Giroux, who states that Fincher’s adaptation of the novel has “deeply conventional views of violence, gender relations, and masculinity,” (261). Other texts—Vafa and Talif (passim), and Ta (passim)—speak of the violence in *Fight Club* as a symptom of lost and/or victimized masculinity and, although they do not necessarily demonize this violence, these texts do not provide the nuance necessary to recognize the violence in *Fight Club* as revolutionary. When it comes to my argument, in particular, the relationship between violence and masculinity will not be discussed, as I instead focus on the relationship between consensual and non-consensual violence, power dynamics, and BDSM in *Fight Club*. Moreover, I take issue with the reductive nature by which the violence in *Fight Club* has been addressed, and I follow in the footsteps of both Olivia Burgess and Allen who argue that the violence in *Fight Club* is consensual in nature and, therefore, cannot be categorized as harmful simply because it displays physical pain and/or injury.

Beckmann differentiates between the non-consensual violence present in everyday life and consensual BDSM. She utilizes Chancer’s discussion of the “somasochism” of everyday life to highlight the difference between what I refer to as “good violence” and “bad violence”.

Beckmann states the following,

there is a ‘somasochistic dynamic’ endemic in the relations between ‘self’ and ‘other’ within society. The social world is thus pre-structured in terms of unequal power relationships. This dynamic consists of symbiotic relationships and mutual dependencies that appear in forms such as sexism, racism, homophobia etc. (131)

As such, Beckmann differentiates between sadomasochism—bad violence—and consensual SM—good violence. She mentions that bad violence creates “conditions of domination” that subsequently generate power inequality, whereas good violence is based on a “profound and definite obligation to power equality based on negotiations and consent which facilitate the growth of feelings and experiences of intersubjectivity between ‘lived bodies’,” (132). When it comes to bad violence, specifically, the author mentions that non-consensual power inequality is especially prominent in dynamics such as romantic love and marriage, and this is due to the institutionalization of patriarchal heterosexuality (ibid, 134). As such, I will consider that bad violence creates non-consensually unequal power dynamics, whereas good violence creates a variety of power dynamics that are consented upon.

When it comes to *Fight Club*, what Beckmann states holds entirely true, as the hetero-romantic dynamics presented in the novel highlight non-consensual power inequality. The first example of this has been mentioned several times throughout this thesis: the relationship between Joe’s parents. The dynamic highlights a problematically unequal power dynamic in that Joe’s father effectively makes decisions that impact the family without receiving consent from either Joe or his mother. By abandoning Joe’s mother and chronically starting family-franchises, Joe’s father leaves his wife with the responsibility of taking care of Joe.

Brake mentions,

conflict over resources and the division of labor is certainly possible within families, as is violence. Family members, as citizens, have basic rights and feminism has demonstrated why legal rights must reach inside families: Within them, individuals can suffer violence and sexual abuse, and dependent individuals can be neglected and mistreated. (103-104)

As demonstrated by the novel, neither Joe nor his mother consent to being neglected, and the division of labor between Joe's parents is entirely unequal, as Joe's father holds the entirety of the power in that regard. Furthermore, this unequal power—and, subsequently, bad violence—creates much pain within the family unit, as Joe ends up feeling severely abandoned, and part of his involvement with BDSM stems from a need to fight his father, as demonstrated by the novel (Palahniuk, 53). As mentioned by Brake, “a recurring worry is that treating marriage as a contract represents the contractor as a self-interested individual who can walk away at will from deep ties of care and intimacy,” (105). Joe's father is a perfect example of a self-interested contractor who, thinking only of himself, imposes a form of bad violence upon his family by choosing to walk away from them without any prior notice or agreement.

The second most prominent example of bad violence—and, consequently, harmfully unequal power dynamics—is the relationship between Tyler and Marla. As highlighted in the previous section of this chapter, the relationship between Tyler and Marla is care-deficient, and Tyler causes Marla a significant amount of emotional strife. On top of the mental and emotional turmoil that Tyler brings upon Marla, he also injures her physically. According to the novel, Tyler hurts Marla so badly that she ends up with a black eye. This particular exchange is most certainly non-consensual, as Marla is extremely distraught by what has happened and threatens to kill Tyler (Palahniuk, 195). As such, it is very clear that Marla is a victim of Tyler, and the dynamic between the pair is entirely unequal in terms of power, as it only benefits Tyler.

As has been highlighted, the hetero-romantic dynamics outside of *Fight Club* are rife with bad violence, as power dynamics between male and female characters are non-

consensually unequal, and this causes a severe amount of collateral damage both emotionally and physically. When it comes to violence within the Fight Club space, on the other hand, the type of violence the men partake in can be considered good violence, as the conditions surrounding it ensure that an abuse of power will not take place. The aforementioned conditions are the three founding principles of BDSM: safety, sanity, and consensuality (Kao, 8). Firstly, when it comes to safety, a standard measure used in BDSM is the establishment of safe words. According to Beckmann, “the existence and actual use of the ‘codeword’ [i.e. safe word], [...] is one of the most crucial and distinct structural elements of consensual ‘SM’,” (127). As has been previously highlighted, safe words are used in Fight Club to signal a halt in the mental and/or physical distress that participants may be in. Accordingly, the safety requirement for healthy BDSM play is met in the case of Fight Club.

Secondly, when it comes to sanity, Staci Newmahr states the following, “‘sane’ is understood as having full awareness of the risks involved; activities are considered sane when participants are informed of the risks and in full control of their faculties when making the decision to take them,” (147). The issue of sanity within the context of Fight Club is a complex one to deconstruct. Technically, Joe is not in his right mind when he has the catalytic initial fight with Tyler, as Tyler is either a figment of Joe’s imagination, or a dissociative alter ego. However, if one were to consider Joe and Tyler to be separate individuals, Joe does understand the risks involved in having that first fight with Tyler, especially after negotiating their wants and needs all throughout the fight (Palahniuk, 46-53).

Furthermore, when it comes to the rest of the club, by simply reading the pamphlet that had been circulating around, men who agreed to joining Fight Club were

fully aware of what they were signing up for, as the pamphlet included rules pertaining to keeping fight club a secret, using the safe word when necessary, partaking in one fight (containing only two men) at a time, fighting without shirts or shoes, and fighting for as long as players can take it (Palahniuk, 48). As such, even if the question of sanity is perplexing in the case of Joe, it is not so in the case of the other Fight Club participants, and it can be said that the requirement of sanity dictated by BDSM culture is mostly met in the case of Fight Club.

Thirdly, Rivoli emphasizes the importance of consent as a fundamental condition of BDSM. She mentions, “consent neutralizes the actions that take place in BDSM encounters; behavior that would be considered violent or abusive in another context becomes acceptable because it is done in a consensual context,” (25). Throughout the previous section of this chapter, I highlighted how the very first incidence of BDSM—the fight between Joe and Tyler—includes a significant amount of communication and negotiation. This carries on throughout the rest of the fights in Fight Club, as participants willingly fight other men for erotic pleasure on a repeated basis—every Saturday (Palahniuk, 52)—all while communicating boundaries and their willingness to be a part of the Fight Club community. As such, consent is very much on the agenda at Fight Club, as participants gather together and challenge each other’s physical limits with full willingness and desire.

Finally, it can be said that by meeting the three fundamental principles of BDSM—safety, sanity, and consensuality (SSC)—Fight Club manages to evade power abuse typically associated with bad violence and, instead, presents audiences with good violence. Heidi Franklin-Reible states that BDSMers “benefit from the promotion and practice of equitable treatment of all persons and the accompanying enhancement in

quality of life,” (68). This is entirely true in the case of Fight Club, as members utilize SSC in order to respect boundaries and partake in acts of erotic violence that benefit everyone involved.

As such, critics who look to the violence portrayed in Fight Club and automatically categorize this violence as negative are reductive in their diagnosis of the dynamics present in the club. Allen makes this same point when responding to Giroux’s accusation against Fight Club. He mentions,

Giroux’s emphasis on the violence ignores its function. [...] By basing his criticism on whether it is morally correct to romanticize violence when so many people are subjected to it on the grounds of sex, colour, gender and class, he ignores the fact that the Fight Clubs are about willing participation not coercion, where pain is consented to. (160)

Burgess makes a similar point in response to Giroux, as she emphasizes the consensual nature of the violence in Fight Club and its function as a means of liberation against larger systems of oppression (267-268). As such, even though Burgess and Allen do not turn to theories such as that of Beckmann—who expands on the difference between non-consensual “conditions of domination”² (that create and reinforce inequality) and consensual SM (that is based on open communication and equality)—in order to make their point, the authors are still correct in their critique of Giroux. Diagnosing violence as inherently negative without an analysis of its motivation and function is problematic, as the nuances of violent behavior are not taken into consideration.

D. Conclusion

Claudio Zanini highlights the function of Fight Club as a cure for collective loneliness. He mentions, “Fight club serves as a way for average men – middle class, hardworking, family heads – to bond and share an experience. The recurrence of

support groups, meetings and gatherings indicates the search for communion typical in Palahniuk's characters," (8). Zanini makes a salient point, especially when considering that Fight Club provides its participants with an interpersonal set-up that is so transgressive, that it looks nothing like the world does outside of the confines of the Fight Club space. This world, according to Zanini, had caused the men of Fight Club so much loss and/or trauma, that they needed to start Fight Club to deal with the social displacement they had been experiencing (8). As highlighted in the first section of this chapter, the first loss that the men of Fight Club had to deal with was that of friendship circles, as romantic relationships took precedence over any type of non-couple-oriented dynamic. However, through the use of BDSM—and, more specifically, the play partner dynamic—Fight Club members transgress the heterocapitalistic imperative towards amatonormative coupling and, subsequently, generate queer interpersonal ways of relating.

Furthermore, Palahniuk frames paternal abandonment—and overall neglect—as a form of cultural trauma witnessed not only by Joe, but by all the Fight Club men when he writes, “what you see at fight club is a generation of men raised by women,” (50). Dynamics in Fight Club, on the other hand, do not function in such a care-deficient, traumatizing manner. In the second section of this chapter, I discuss how Fight Club members utilize alternative modes of care that directly counter the care-deficient dynamics these men witnessed from an early age. The Fight Club space employs techniques of care—communication, negotiation, and safe words—found within BDSM culture to ensure that its participants provide each other with genuine care and not cause harm upon one another.

Finally, a discussion on care dynamics in Fight Club would not be complete without an analysis of violence used both within and outside the club, especially when this violence has been addressed with very little nuance. Robert Brissey Jr. mentions, Fight Club functions as an extreme yet sincere version of the homosocial dynamics “Joe” has been seeking throughout his forays into the workplace and support groups. However, it is easy to be dismissive of such social gatherings as merely an excuse for violence, which might otherwise be perpetrated against others and which fight club merely redirects. (30)

To denote any violence as “bad” or transgression-deficient simply because of the relationship between violence and (problematic) masculinity is extremely reductive and highlights a lack of understanding of the intricacies of violence and power dynamics. Accordingly, the third section of this chapter aims to delineate problematic violence from non-problematic violence and, consequently, highlight the truly transgressive nature of BDSM physicality used in Fight Club.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Before officially taking this project on, I thought my argument would not be an original one, in the least. With such radically transgressive body practices and community formation, *Fight Club*—and, more specifically, the Fight Club space—presents its audiences with a narrative that, in my opinion, can very clearly be categorized as BDSM fiction. This specific categorization, however, is shared by only one of the critics—Allen—who have analyzed *Fight Club*. One of the reasons for this, I speculated, was that the BDSM narrative in *Fight Club* comes to a halt. Allen mentions that “play [...] becomes corrupted” when Fight Club transforms into Project Mayhem (157). Burgess makes a similar point when differentiating between the “dynamic and subversive nature of fight club and the militaristic and fascist system of Project Mayhem,” (263). Consequently, the following question came to mind: how can critics recognize the presence of BDSM in *Fight Club* when the BDSM elements themselves cease to exist?

However, upon a close inspection of BDSM theory, the answer became clear: the BDSM in *Fight Club* was always meant to come to an end because this, unfortunately, is the trajectory of BDSM. In their discussion of BDSM practices, Murray et al. write,

It is tempting to think that new pleasures will somehow escape discursive power structures, and that by engaging in them we might find that we desire them. But when asked if we can be sure that these practices will not themselves be co-opted, exploited, reterritorialized as a means of social control, [Foucault] responds that this is of course inevitable. (138)

This is exactly what happens in *Fight Club*. In discussing the transition from Fight Club to Project Mayhem, Burgess mentions, “revolutions against a dominant power structure

are often just stages in the rise of a new and equally oppressive social order,” (266). Even though Burgess does not explicitly categorize the type of activity taking place within the Fight Club space as BDSM, the author’s differentiation of Fight Club from Project Mayhem highlights an engagement with fundamental concepts found within BDSM theory and, consequently, further proves the presence of radical BDSM within *Fight Club*.

Firstly, Burgess differentiates between the type of bruising taking place both in Fight Club and Project Mayhem in order to problematize the latter’s relationship with labor. The author mentions that bruising in Fight Club is an indication of communal belonging, all while maintaining individual identities—“each individual is uniquely cut, bloodied, and beaten as a fingerprint,” (275). Bruising in Project Mayhem, on the other hand, is a sign of ultimate obedience for a capitalistic end goal. The men of Project Mayhem were, in Palahniuk’s words, “scarring kisses [on their hands] with lye or superglue,” (210). This was the same lye that Project Mayhem members were using in order to produce and sell soap, as per Tyler’s instructions (ibid, 130). Burgess mentions, “even the position of the lye burn on the hand draws the attention to the outermost reaches of the body, to the part that will provide the labor for Tyler’s demands—the only part of the body that matters,” (275).

As such, it is fair to say that the (re)productive imperative that Fight Club was able to transgress through the use of BDSM was, ultimately, regenerated within Project Mayhem. Instead of engaging in bodily practices for the sheer purpose of pleasure, Project Mayhem members were using their bodies for the production of capital. These members also had to formally apply to join Project Mayhem (127), which further highlights their function as laborers in Tyler’s army. With Fight Club, on the other

hand, members were not treated at all like potential laborers. Fight Club members did not have to meet special requirements for joining the club; the only thing they had to do was follow its rules. Moreover, even though a number of Fight Club's started emerging after the inception of the original Fight Club, this expansion was not capitalistically oriented. The club was, initially, never meant to multiply—as per the first two rules of the club: you don't talk about fight club (48). However, Burgess states that “the first rule is literally made to be broken, giving it a subversive and playful undertone that emphasizes the community's transgressive engagement with boundaries,” (275-276). As such, it can be said the Fight Club space differs greatly from the Project Mayhem space in that it does not promote capitalistic growth and encourages body usage for the purpose of pure pleasure. The Project Mayhem space, on the other hand, is a capitalistic project that sees individuals, and bodies, only as tools for expansion.

Another difference between Project Mayhem and Fight Club relates to care dynamics. As previously mentioned, Fight Club promotes care between its members through the use of BDSM that encourages mutual understanding and harm reduction and, consequently, transgresses patriarchal heterocapitalism. Project Mayhem, on the other hand, fails at ensuring care between members. In describing the “homework” that Tyler assigns to Project Mayhem's Assault Committee, Palahniuk writes,

pick a fight where [you] won't come out a hero. And not in fight club. This is harder than it sounds. A man on the street will do anything not to fight. The idea is to take some Joe on the street who's never been in a fight and recruit him. Let him experience winning for the first time in his life. Get him to explode. Give him permission to beat the crap out of you. You can take it. If you win, you screwed up. (119)

This instruction highlights just how little Tyler cares about the safety of Project Mayhem members. Tyler's army is not afforded the “luxury” of safety, as its members need to pick fights that are not demarcated by any physical or mental boundary other

than the victory of their opponents. With *Fight Club*, on the other hand, Tyler encourages the use of a safe word—a typical BDSM practice—in case fighters are no longer able to handle what is taking place during a fight (49).

Furthermore, Burgess points to a second example of care-deficiency within Project Mayhem. In response to the Project Mayhem’s mantra—“you are not a beautiful and unique snowflake,” (Palahniuk, 134)—Burgess states, “Tyler purposefully belittles and dehumanizes his followers to assert control and inhibit inquiry,” (275). This is not at all surprising, as Tyler exhibits no sense of care when dealing with Project Mayhem members, especially Joe. After creating Project Mayhem and recruiting members, Tyler is suddenly nowhere to be found. Palahniuk writes, “I am Joe’s broken heart because Tyler dumped me. Because my father dumped me,” (134). By comparing Tyler to Joe’s father—who, incidentally, views people by their ability to extend his “franchises” (ibid, 50)—Palahniuk indirectly points to dynamics that are similar in deficiency of care. Therefore, this highlights how a movement from BDSM-oriented dynamics to non-BDSM oriented dynamics requires the abandonment of an ethic that encourages interpersonal empathy.

Finally, the most important distinction that Burgess makes between *Fight Club* and Project Mayhem relates to consent and violence. The author mentions,

While fight club uses consensual violence to gain an immediate sense of liberation, Project Mayhem directs violence outward to nonconsenting others and justifies its actions by the promise of liberation in the future. This is the model of revolution Merleau-Ponty proffers where the hope of future liberation is used to justify terror and enslavement in the present. (268)

Burgess is entirely true in this distinction and in the implication that Project Mayhem uses non-consensual violence as a terror tactic justified by the promise of change. The most salient example of the latter point is the interaction between Joe and Raymond

Hessel. Joe had been instructed by Tyler to, essentially, terrorize Raymond into improving his life. According to Joe, Raymond was “working a shit job for just enough money to buy cheese and watch television,” (Palahniuk, 154). In order to motivate Raymond to start living “properly,” Joe (based on Tyler’s instructions) threatened Raymond by pressing against several parts of his body and forcing an interrogation upon him. Throughout this entire encounter, Raymond was terrified. He tried to distance himself from Joe’s gun, and he broke out into tears several times (ibid, 151-154). Upon finding out Raymond’s dream career—veterinary work—Joe threatened Raymond by saying,

I know who you are. I know where you live. I’m keeping your license, and I’m going to check on you, Mr. Raymond K. Hessel. In three months, and then in six months, and then in a year, and if you aren’t back in school on your way to being a veterinarian, you will be dead. (154)

Based on Beckmann’s discussion of the difference between consensual (BD) SM and torture, the encounter between Joe and Raymond can very easily be described as torture. She mentions that torturers use violence in order to gain control over victims and to get them to admit to a certain truth (148). This is exactly what happens between Joe and Raymond, as the former utilizes his gun in order to instill a fear so great in Raymond, that he wouldn’t dare disobey Joe’s command.

Moreover, the truth that Joe was so desperate to hear from Raymond is that his life is not what he intended it to be. By forcing a number of questions on a very scared, very tearful Raymond, Joe discovers that the former was studying biology, but what he really wanted to be was a veterinarian. As such, Joe decides to take matters into his own hands and threatens to kill Raymond if he does not immediately change his life trajectory (Palahniuk, 153-154). Beckmann mentions that upholding the continuation of the state—and, consequently, state power—justifies the use of violence within torture.

Within the context of *Fight Club*, Tyler essentially becomes the state through the creation of Project Mayhem. Consequently, Joe justifies his actions against Raymond by stating, “this is what Tyler wants me to do. These are Tyler’s words coming out of my mouth. I am Tyler’s mouth. I am Tyler’s hands. Everybody in Project Mayhem is part of Tyler Durden, and vice versa,” (154-155).

When it comes to Fight Club, on the other hand, violence is not used for any nefarious purpose, or ulterior motive, and it is consented upon by all members of the collective. Where Project Mayhem employs bad violence, Fight Club uses the ethics of BDSM—safe, sane, and consensual—to employ good violence that takes into consideration the well-being of its participants. Burgess points to a “productive order to fight club, allowing men to delve into impulse and embodiment but within meaningful boundaries,” (276). This is true, as Fight Club members negotiate personal limits and willingly engage their bodies in erotic violence that maximizes pleasure, all while taking into account mental and physical wellness. As such, *Fight Club* presents audiences with a very tangible example of the difference between non-harmful, interpersonally-negotiated BDSM, and destructive, power-driven torture.

In conclusion, I believe that a work like that of Palahniuk requires a nuanced understanding of queerness, alternative community, and (good and bad) violence in order to be understood as something more than either a queer failure or, as Giroux puts it, “senseless brutality,” (272). If one were to look to BDSM theory, they would recognize just how closely the body practices and interpersonal dynamics within Fight Club mirror those of BDSM. In fact, I believe the BDSM narrative within *Fight Club* comes to a halt for this very reason: it was always meant to. This, however, does not—and should not—dismiss the very real, very radical presence of BDSM within *Fight*

Club, especially when the subversive effects of this BDSM were so clearly present throughout the narrative.

Moreover, working on this dissertation has pushed me to reconsider how a BDSM reading can be done not just with texts like *Fight Club*—whose use of BDSM fell invisible vis-à-vis critics—but also with texts that are advertised as being representative of BDSM. Such a work is E.L. James’ *Fifty Shades of Grey*. In summary, the trilogy follows the trajectory of the relationship between Christian Grey—twenty-seven-year-old millionaire and supposed BDSM expert—and Anastasia Steele, an English Literature graduate who—to Christian’s dismay—is traditionally romantic and, consequently, (initially) anti-BDSM. According to Emma Green, the series amassed monumental success in its first week, as the first novel immediately hit *The New York Times* bestseller list (“Consent Isn’t Enough: The Troubling Sex of *Fifty Shades*”). Even though, as Green mentions, this wasn’t the only novel with BDSM at the forefront, “it’s a book 100 million people chose. It’s a movie that has already flooded the Internet with sexy GIFs and endless trailers,” (ibid).

Green points to an important fact: sex, especially when so overt, sells. Sex sells so much that a novel that is as far removed from BDSM as possible can still be advertised as a BDSM novel. Green mentions that *Fifty Shades of Grey* does not demonstrate the use of proper BDSM, as it fails to exhibit “healthy, ethical ways to consensually combine sex and pain,” (ibid). Similarly, Elliston mentions that consent is fickle with the case of James’ text, and he even goes as far as describing the novel’s cinematic adaptation as “dangerous” (Smith, “Fifty Shades of Grey: What BDSM Enthusiasts Think”).

Therefore, it is useful to question why works such as that of James are, at the onset, so easily categorized as BDSM literature when the dynamics presented do not adhere to what is considered proper BDSM practice. As has been highlighted throughout my dissertation, BDSM is radical in its use of erotic practices that defy a number of norms surrounding heterosexuality, patriarchy, and capitalism. This is why *Fight Club* can, in fact, be described as a BDSM narrative, as the type of activity taking place within the Fight Club space is abundantly transgressive and, unlike James' work, includes consensual activity based on clear communication and mutual enjoyment. As such, I believe that the standard of what is considered a BDSM narrative is fundamentally lacking in nuance, as it is not enough for a work—like *Fifty Shades of Grey*—to include violent eroticism to be considered a work representative of BDSM. This type of reading is very superficial in nature, and it does not take into consideration just how political BDSM activity truly is. Hence, I call for an understanding of BDSM that offers a work like that of Palahniuk its due diligence and, consequently, measures other literary (and cinematic) works not by how closely related they are to sex that is violent, but by whether the violent sex in said work is transgressive—the way BDSM is meant to be—or not.

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