



‘We Play Men’
Masculinity, Shame and Precariousness
within Gay Leather Performances

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XXLeather party in Amsterdam serves as the primary inspiration and site of exploration for my thesis autoethnographic project. My involvement in the community and my volunteer work at the parties have provided me with substantial experience and significant material for analysis.

XXXLeather is a men-only fetish, dance, and cruising party that adheres to a strict dress code focused on Leather, Rubber, Uniforms, and similar fetish gear. This event takes place every third Sunday of each month at Club Church on Kerkstraat 52, near Leidseplein in Amsterdam. Established in 2005, XXXLeather is one of the oldest leather parties in Amsterdam, with roots that extend even further back. It is a community-driven event, managed and operated by volunteers who are all enthusiasts of fetish gear.

Abstract

This thesis explores the performance of masculinity within gay leather subcultures through a queer autoethnographic lens. Grounded in a constructionist and performative approach to gender, the research examines the subcultural performance of the Leatherman in relation to societal norms. Drawing from personal experiences in the contemporary Amsterdam leather community and theoretical frameworks by Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Sarah Ahmed, and Leo Bersani, this research delves into the complexities and contradictions within the concept of masculinity. Central to the Leatherman performance is the enactment of ‘masculinity realness’ fantasies, deeply entrenched in heteronormative ideals. By drawing parallels with drag performance, the Leatherman persona highlights the performativity of gender. However, the persistent hetero fantasies engender essentialist undertones, leading to a coexisting paradox of both idealization and subversion of traditional hetero-masculine norms. The study further examines how Leatherman performance is shaped by queer shame, utilizing BDSM sexual practices to underscore the precarious formation of the subject. Using the formulation ‘we play men,’ the exploration of the Leatherman performance is based on the hypothesis that non-conforming assigned males at birth begin to ‘play men’ during childhood due to the experience of shaming for not conforming to masculine ideals and continue to ‘play men’ throughout adulthood within the context of pleasure and sexual play. Leatherman performance navigates a journey from shame and failed masculinity to a fetishized celebration of hypermasculinity, symbolized by the leather material. Drawing from queer and affect theories, the thesis claims that ostensibly ‘extreme’ sexual practices of the Leatherman performance, which include fetishism and BDSM practices, offer broader insights into subject formation.

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“Sooner or later, though, no matter where in the world we live,
we must join the diaspora, venturing beyond our biological family to find our logical
one, the one that actually makes sense for us.”

Armistead Maupin,
Logical Family: A Memoir (prologue)

Vignette

I remember myself at the age of twenty-five, trying to understand how to ‘play the man’ during my acting studies at drama school in Athens. I recall being thirty years old and writing a thesis for my master’s program in Cultural and Film Studies about a male Greek solo dance called ‘zeibekiko,’ exploring the dance as a performance within Richard Schechner’s conceptual framework. However, I did not question why that dance was considered a male dance. I did not inquire why it is associated with masculinity, virility, stiffness, and spirituality, and I certainly forgot to ask why the female counterpart dance in Greek, ‘tsifteteli,’ which is a solo female dance, is associated with femininity, lightness, and agility. The gender and sexual aspects are fundamental in both dances, yet I did not question why in zeibekiko, ‘one plays the man,’ and why in tsifteteli, ‘one plays the woman.’

And some years later at my thirty-three, I quit a master’s programme in Theatre Studies with an unfinished paper titled ‘Gender: An Act Between Performativity and Theatricality.’ Now, nearing the age of forty, as I write this master’s thesis, I try to understand what I was attempting to do. And when? Was it during my academic and artistic studies? Was it when I was thirteen years old and threw my childhood dolls, my Barbies, in the garbage? Was that when I decided to survive in the heteronormative world? Was it when I deliberately altered my voice, making it harsher? When I ceased laughing and being overly expressive, for fear of spoiling my masculine gender performance? As a child, I was trying to be masculine and transparent to avoid bullying and humiliation. But I failed. I was not good at performing masculinity. And then I failed to ‘play the man’ in drama school. As I was entering the theatrical stage, I continually repeated to myself, ‘you have to play the man,’ and I realized that I did not understand what ‘man’ signifies. I am still trying to understand.

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1. Introduction

You cannot evade the past. This statement does not reflect a psychological perspective on past trauma. It encapsulates my experiential observation concerning academic research and writing. A researcher's positionality is always present, whether as a specter, a shadow, or a constructive partner. I choose the third alternative because, at this juncture in my personal history, I refuse to elude myself. Instead, I have decided to utilize my personal experiences as the starting point for this thesis project. Thus, I embark on a queer autoethnographic inquiry aimed at examining the manifestation and function of the concept of masculinity within gay leather subcultures. Through this exploration, I investigate how the performativity of gender and masculinity operates through dissonances and ambiguities in the Leatherman performance.

This is a project about men who do not conform to gender and sexual (hetero) norms and navigate their masculinity in various queer ways. They are referred to as gay men, queer men, or even men who have sex with men. There are various categorizations and nomenclatures that describe deviations from a supposed heterosexual masculinity. The title 'We Play Men' emerged during a discussion with my supervisor, Dr. Ida Hansen, regarding my idea to explore 'gay leather subcultures,' a community I am a part of. During our conversation, I spontaneously mentioned, 'you know, we play men in our leather gatherings at the sex club.' My supervisor nodded as if to say, 'This is it.'

Initially, I did not pay much attention, but since that moment, this phrase has stuck in my mind, evoking various incidents from my past. From my childhood memories at school, where I tried to conform and eradicate any feminine signs in my gender performance, to my acting studies, where I attempted to enact an idealized hetero-masculine performance of men. Reflecting on my past experiences, I now recognize that I 'played the man' not only in my everyday life but also in my sexual life. My fantasies were and still are full of 'playing men acts,' loaded with leather fetishism and BDSM practices. Specifically, despite not conforming to conventional heterosexual norms of masculinity, I find myself actively participating in gender and sexual performances of hypermasculinity, within the gay leather subcultures. My research explores how the conception of 'playing men' is displayed within gay leather performances. Thus, it is based on a constructionist and performative approach to

gender, postulating that individuals assigned male at birth are expected to conform to a heterosexual form of masculinity.

In alignment with Judith Butler's work, I embrace the notion that there exists a "tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions" (Butler 1988, 520). Butler introduces the concept of a "heterosexual matrix," suggesting that gender and sexuality are naturalized through cultural inscriptions and regulations (Butler 1999, 194). Echoing Butler's insights, Gayle Rubin challenges sexual essentialism, advocating for the understanding of gender and sexuality as products of social construction rather than biological determinants (Rubin 2011, 146). Rubin further posits the existence of a societal "sexual value system," which privileges expressions of heterosexuality as normative while marginalizing alternative sexualities, such as homosexuality (ibid, 151). This value system is manifested through gender and sexual norms, resulting in several implications for individuals concerning their gender and sexual performance.

Grounded in this theoretical framework and enriched by personal experiences, I posit a hypothesis concerning the response to societal shame and stigma imposed upon boys who deviate from masculine norms, whether due to their sexual or gender performance. This hypothesis suggests that we begin to 'play men' as a survival mechanism within heteronormative society in order to distance ourselves from labels such as feminine boys, sissies, fairies, or fags. I contend that we start 'playing men' because we have internalized the belief that this is right, normal, sexy, and powerful. 'We play men' out of fear of experiencing once again that initial sense of shame we felt when it was (in/directly) communicated to us that our behavior was feminine and wrong.

In the transition to adulthood, as we embrace our non-heterosexual identities and immerse ourselves in various facets of gay culture, including the leather and fetish subcultures central to my research, I hypothesize that we continue to 'play men'. In this respect, my thesis, particularly in its second chapter, delves into the endurance of 'playing men acts' throughout adulthood, focusing on the question: Why do we persist in 'playing men,' especially in performances associated with pleasure, such as sexual play? This question forms the core inquiry of this research project. I examine this phenomenon of 'playing men,' using autoethnography, as a self-identified gay male, leather fetishist, and BDSM practitioner. Drawing from my personal experiences of encountering deviant performances of masculinity and gender during childhood, I

explore my own participation in this Leatherman performance in adulthood, despite its association with a form of masculinity that has historically perpetuated oppression and negative affects. I approach the Leatherman figure through my personal experiences in Amsterdam's leather community.

Elaborating on the formulation 'we play men,' I suggest that 'we' denotes non-conforming assigned males and adult gay male identified subjects. Conversely, 'men' represents an idealized performance of masculinity, encompassing traditional and heterosexist notions of a supposed singular, monolithic manifestation of masculinity. In my analysis, I transition from the 'we play men' conception to the 'I play the man' through my autoethnographic approach. This method underscores the partiality of knowledge production and the subjective element of my hypothesis and overall argumentation. It is based on my personal experience and does not assume universal applicability. I examine the role of masculinity within the specific context of gay leather subcultures, with a particular focus on the queer expression of hypermasculinity. Martin Levine, in his sociological and ethnographic research, describes a shift in Western gay male culture in the 1970s when gays "embraced a more traditional masculine ethos" (Levine 1998, 7). However, as he highlights, the adoption of this masculinity was redefined in "a new kind of camp," exemplified by the music band "Village People" (ibid, 29), where the members embodied various macho personas, including the Leatherman. The concept of the Leatherman (Townsend 1972; Rubin 2005; Barrett, 2017) incorporates "a distinct gay macho style" (Lieshout 1995, 23) at the intersections of gay identity, leather fetishism, and BDSM sexual practices.

The Leatherman performance encompasses a wide spectrum of non-normative gender and sexual expressions. It is often analyzed in conjunction with the exaggerated femininity seen in drag performances, both serving as queer masquerades that illuminate the constructedness and performativity of gender (Hennen 2008). However, my aim extends beyond a mere exploration of the performativity of the Leatherman as a means to denaturalize masculinity. Similarly, I do not seek to debate whether gay leather performance is subversive or hegemonic. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick aptly suggests, it likely embodies elements of both (Sedgwick 1993, 14). My focus is on examining the phenomenon of Leatherman performance through Sedgwick's concept of queer performativity. I delve into the intricate interplay of "meaning, being, and doing" (Sedgwick 1993, 2) within the performativity of the Leatherman, under the theoretical perspectives of shame, subject formation, and precariousness. This

perspective highlights both the fetishization and fragility of masculinity within gay leather subcultures. Therefore, I investigate how the Leatherman performance unfolds within an environment where masculinity is both celebrated and contested.

In the first analytic chapter ‘Playing the Leatherman: Hypermasculinity in Action’, the focus is on the performative aspects of hypermasculinity, drawing from Butler’s theory of gender performativity. This chapter examines how hypermasculinity is enacted within the Leatherman subculture, emphasizing the use of leather material and props to enhance masculinity. In the subsection ‘Masculine Fetishizations: Gear Stays on’, I explore the various ways in which the performance of masculinity is intensified within the Leatherman subculture, particularly focusing on the fetishization of leather and its association with specific aspects and fantasies of homosocial scenarios. Continuing the analysis, in Subsection ‘Masculine Realness: Take it like Man & Give it like Man,’ I approach the Leatherman performance focusing on its enactment of hetero masculine ideals. Drawing a parallel to drag performance, the Leatherman performance highlights the performativity of gender and underscores that gender is relational to societal norms although creating a coexistent paradox of idealization and subversion of traditional notions of hetero masculinity.

In the second analytic chapter ‘Beyond Leather Hypermasculinity: Shameful Desires and Precarious Formations’ the exploration shifts to the complex interplay of shame, precariousness, and subjectivity within Leatherman performance and BDSM practices. This chapter examines the hypermasculinity of Leatherman performance from another aspect of gender performativity, which is related to subject formation. According to Butler, there is no subject that precedes gender performance. Instead, the subject is formed through performative acts (Butler 1988, 519). In this regard, I explore how Leatherman performance is shaped by queer shame and how BDSM sexual practices underscore the precarious formation of the subject. In Subsection ‘Bound by Shame: The Complexity of Leather Desires,’ I employ Butler’s and Sedgwick’s perspectives on performativity, focusing on queerness and shame as significant elements of subject formation within Leatherman performance. Additionally, I draw connections to Sara Ahmed’s affective perspective on shame, emphasizing its powerful impact on gay individuals and communities, including those within the gay leather subcultures. In the subsection ‘Embracing Precariousness: BDSM Intimacies and Selves Undone,’ I focus on the BDSM sexual practices of the Leatherman performance, through the lens of Leo Bersani’s antisocial perspective in queer theory and I explore

the precarious subject formations of selves. This subsection explores how BDSM practices can serve as spaces for exploring the shattering of selves, embracing negativity, and challenging traditional humanistic notions of coherent subjects and futurity.

Consequently, my research project contributes to the scholarly field of masculinity and queer studies by shedding light on the ambiguities of the subcultural acts and performances of the Leatherman persona. This exploration examines the broader dissonances of masculinity as an unstable concept oscillating between oppression and pleasure through its constructedness, performativity and sexual investment. In line with Bersani's assertion that "If licking someone's leather boots turns you (and him) on, neither of you is making a statement subversive of macho masculinity" (Bersani 2010, 14), my research aligns with queer theories advocating for a nuanced understanding of gender and sexual expression, "without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized" (Butler 2002, preface (1999) viii). Thus, my study of masculinity within gay leather subcultures, viewed through a queer theory lens, intends to highlight the precariousness of masculinity as a profound and applicable analytic insight that goes beyond the domains of queer sexuality and non-normative gender. It contributes to ongoing discussions within academia regarding the fluidity and complexity of gender and sexual expressions.

2. Methodology: Creating a Queer Autoethnographic Project

When you choose to speak about yourself, you probably feel that your story is worth sharing or that you simply cannot hold back. I am not certain if my story needs to be heard, but I know I cannot keep silent. The queer writer Édouard Louis notes that “Autobiography has always been the genre for the oppressed” (Louis 2023). Is autoethnography a way for oppressed and marginalized voices to be heard? Do I belong to the oppressed? Throughout my life, I have felt that my queerness automatically places me in an oppressed position. However, as noted by feminist Donna Haraway, “the standpoints of the subjugated are not innocent positions” (Haraway 1988, 584). Haraway emphasizes that research objectivity involves “situated knowledge,” and further asserts that “only a partial perspective promises objective vision” (ibid, 583). Adding to Haraway’s position that knowledge is socially situated, feminist Sandra Harding proposes that “strong objectivity” requires “strong reflexivity,” in the sense that “the subject of knowledge must be considered as part of the object of knowledge from the perspective of scientific method” (Harding 1992, 458-459).

In adopting autoethnography as a method, I embrace the non-neutral quality of knowledge. I incorporate my subjective and embodied experiences as primary elements and resources of knowledge themselves. In line with these perspectives on knowledge production, I ground my queer autoethnographic project within the framework of feminist research practices. Speaking about sex, particularly gay fetish and BDSM, is a risky choice that aims to convey much but can sometimes end up saying nothing at all. I feel that personal experience can unintentionally lead to endless nostalgic self-storytelling without a clear purpose. In this regard, autoethnography creates numerous controversies surrounding relativism and the oversimplification of the described events. Some critique it for being “too artful and not scientific, or too scientific and not sufficiently artful.” (Ellis et al. 2001, 283).

Reflecting on why I chose autoethnography to analyze gender and sexual performances within gay leather subcultures, instead of exploring cultural representations, for example, I feel that there is a significance in the rawness of experience that I wanted to bring to academia. However, as historian Joan Scott posits experience is not an unproblematic form of knowledge. Rather, it necessitates analysis regarding the production of such knowledge. What qualifies as experience is not

inherently obvious or simple. It is constantly debated and, as a result, inherently political. Experience is “already an interpretation and something that needs to be interpreted.” (Scott 1991, 797). This perspective underscores the importance of clear reflexivity and positioning within the research process.

The practice of writing reflectively requires researchers to maintain a heightened awareness of how their personal backgrounds, including gender, race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, ability status, and various other markers of identity, as well as their perspectives and motivations, impact every phase of the research process (Pillow 2003, 178-179). In this context, describing my non-normative gender and sexual experiences does not present a self-evident form of knowledge or establish truths or proofs. Instead, as Scott emphasizes, they are sites for scrutiny, “not the origin of our explanation but that which we aim to explain” (Scott 1991, 797).

2.1 Doing autoethnography in sexual subcultures: Being the leather subject and object of analysis

Autoethnography merges personal experience (auto) with the study of a specific phenomenon, community, or culture (ethnography). Drawing upon my personal experiences as a gay, kinky, submissive leatherman, I employ them as analytical material to investigate the cultural phenomenon of gay Leatherman performances, particularly within the contemporary Amsterdam leather community. Autoethnography reflects postmodernist perspectives on the unattainability of universal narratives, feminist critiques concerning coherent and unified subjects in academic research, and queer critiques of stable normative identities. It emphasizes value-centered approaches to research rather than adhering to value-free perspectives. As such, autoethnographers must remain aware of “the innumerable ways personal experience influences the research process” (Ellis et al. 2001, 274).

Autoethnography is an actively self-reflexive method of writing about past experiences that constitute the research scene (Poulos 2021, 4). In this sense, autoethnography serves as both a “process and product” (Ellis et al. 2001, 274). My own research scenes are my ‘Leather Scenes and Scenarios’, encompassing experiences in exclusive spaces, whether private or public. Specifically, I use my personal hookups as material for analysis, describing encounters that occurred in the homes of gay leather men across several Dutch cities. Furthermore, I draw insights from my social and sexual

interactions in public sex clubs in Amsterdam, such as Club Church, Dirty Dicks, and The Web.

My primary aim in engaging with the Amsterdam leather community was to explore my sexual fantasies and find ‘my people’—other kinksters¹ who share similar sexual explorations. Central to my methodology is the dictum that I do not approach these gatherings as an outsider immersing themselves in a community to observe. Instead, I consider myself part of this community. I am an insider whose experience is subjective and influenced by affective and personal biases. Feminist research methodologies critique the idea of conducting research in a value-free way and have tackled issues related “power relations, confidentiality, and anti-oppressive practices.” (Bell 2019, 137) These aspects all require ethical considerations and a reflection on personal values within the research process. (ibidem)

In my exploration of sexual pleasure, spiritual connection, and socialization, I construct narratives of gay leather subcultures, aiming to create a “thick description” in the sense defined by Clifford Geertz, rather than seeking “abstract regularities” (Geertz 1973, 26). The formulation ‘we play men’ serves as a backdrop and conceptual framework that highlights the heteronormative standards prevailing in societies, rather than acting as a generalization for non-conforming assigned males. Consequently, my analysis focuses on my personal experiences of ‘playing the man’ through an autoethnographic approach, without claiming a universal truth about gay leather performances. Instead, it serves as a terrain for examining the complexities of gender and sexuality within this subculture.

2.2 The exploration of gay leather subcultures: A review of scholarly literature

Gay leather subcultures and the Leatherman figure, as cultural, social, and sexual phenomena, have been examined since the 1970s. Representative works include Larry Townsend’s *The Leatherman’s Handbook* (1972), Geoff Mains’ *Urban Aboriginals: A Celebration of Leathersexuality* (1984), and Gayle Rubin’s extensive

¹ The term ‘kinkster’ or ‘kinky enthusiasts’ serves as an umbrella concept that encompasses a wide range of sexual practices deemed non-normative, irrespective of gender identity and sexual orientation. This term carries significant connotations of both older and contemporary medical pathologization, social stigma, and prejudice. Among these non-normative practices, fetishism and BDSM stand out as some of the most prevalent expressions of kink.

research in San Francisco leather subcultures, published in various forms (Rubin 1994, Rubin 2000). The emergence of the Leatherman is intertwined with to the post-World War II western cities, urbanization, capitalism, and the emergence of gay communities in major cities in the USA (D'Emilio 1993, 467). Central to the Leatherman persona is the adoption of black leather motorcycle attire, which finds its primary association with motorcycle clubs in the 1950s United States (Rubin, 2000, 66). Additionally, two cultural representations played a pivotal role in solidifying the Leatherman's imagery: Marlon Brando's portrayal in the film *The Wild One* (1954) and the homoerotic male artistry of Tom of Finland (1920-1990) (Baldwin 2003, 37; Thompson 2004, 30).

The Leatherman persona frequently intersects with BDSM sexual practices, often characterized by male-to-male sadomasochistic behavior (Townsend 1972, 13). G. W. Kamel, in "Leathersex: Meaningful Aspects of Gay Sadomasochism" (1980), defines the action of gay S/M as 'leathersex,' with its practitioners identified as 'Leathermen' (Kamel 1980, 171). Gayle Rubin offers insight into this intersection through ethnographic research conducted at the gay and lesbian S/M leather fisting club known as 'Catacombs' in her study titled "The Catacombs: A Temple of the Butthole." Rubin's approach brings forth another aspect of my thesis project, which connects gay leather subcultures to sex club culture, public sex, and cruising culture. Among others, Pat Califia, in *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex*, and Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, in their article "Sex in Public," have explored various aspects from stigma and pathologization to identity formation.

In their article titled "Layers of Leather: The Identity Formation of Leathermen as a Process of Transforming Meanings of Masculinity" (2006), Mosher, Chad M., Heidi M. Levitt, and Eric Manley explore the concept of the 'Leatherman' as a unique form of masculinity. This form integrates "care and vulnerability with an aesthetic of heightened masculine appearance" (Mosher et al. 2006, 93). This exploration of the Leatherman concept and its relationship to masculinity is a recurring theme in existing literature. For instance, Peter Hennen, in his work "Feeling a Bit under the Leather: Hypermasculinity, Performativity, and the Specter of Starched Chiffon," (2008), examines the concept of the performativity of leather masculinity. Hennen draws upon Judith Butler's analysis of gender performativity, particularly in relation to drag performances in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, to explore the subversive potential of leather drag, as he called the Leatherman performance.

Against this backdrop, my research project draws on traditions of gay leather masculinity, gender, and sexual performance, focusing on the ambiguities of masculinity within this subculture. By incorporating critical affect and queer theories of subject formation into this domain of study, my exploration indicates that seemingly marginalized subcultural practices, particularly those concerning sexual and gender expression, offer valuable insights into broader themes of subject formation.

2.3 Queer Theories: Performativity, Affect, and the Antisocial Thesis

In this project, the primary focus of analysis is masculinity as manifested through the gay Leatherman performance. I examine masculinity through the lenses of gender performativity, affective approaches, and the antisocial thesis within queer theory perspectives. The study of masculinity falls under the broader field of Men and Masculinity studies, which examines various forms of masculinity using the plural term ‘masculinities’ to denote variabilities in its manifestation. Raewyn Connell’s extensive research is particularly influential, proposing that “a specific masculinity is not constructed in isolation but in relation to other masculinities and femininities” (Connell 1992, 745). Connell further suggests that “certain constructions of masculinity are hegemonic, while others are subordinated or marginalized” (Connell 1992, 737). Gay masculinities are typically categorized in the latter subdivision, while hegemonic masculinity is considered “explicitly and exclusively heterosexual” (Connell 1992 736). Within this context, Connell emphasizes the social dimensions and construction of masculinity, aligning with the focus of this project on masculinity. However, my approach to masculinity as an integral element of the Leatherman performance centers on gender performativity.

I draw upon Judith Butler’s concept of performativity as outlined in the article “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” (1988). This work establishes the notion that gender exists only through its performance, drawing a parallel with the theatrical performance of an actor on stage. However, Butler underscores that in gender performativity, there is no actor who exists prior to the gender performance. Rather, the actor is co-constituted through the performance. (Butler 1988, 520) There is a constitutive element of subject formation incorporated in gender performativity, which Butler further elaborates on in various

texts, articles, and publications such as *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (2011), *Undoing Gender* (2004), and *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015).

Butler suggests that gender is a ‘graphic event’ (Butler 2015, 29) and a ‘check’ in a box next to the word ‘boy’ or ‘girl’ on the day of our birth. This event creates a series of cultural and social norms that are not simply imprinted on us, “but they also ‘produce’ us” (Butler 2015, 29). They suggest that “gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 1988, 519). In this regard, there is “neither an ‘essence’ that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires” (Butler 1988, 520). They further contend that there is a “tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions” (Butler 1988, 520). This collective agreement is manifested in the fact that “those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished” (Butler 1988, 522).

The failure to adhere to gender norms serves as the starting point for this thesis. Experiences such as bullying, punishment, ridicule, and the consequent manifestation of shame for not conforming to gender norms are fundamental to my understanding of gay leather performances. In addition to Judith Butler’s perspective on gender performativity, I incorporate Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s work, which employs an affective approach, viewing shame as a constitutive element of queer performativity. Sedgwick’s framework represents the affective turn in cultural criticism, where emotions, feelings, and affect, especially negative such as shame, failure, melancholy, and depression, become the subjects of scholarly investigation (Cvetkovich 2012, 3).

Sedgwick, in the article “Queer Performativity: Henry James’s *The Art of the Novel*,” (1993), connects queer performativity to the affect of shame experienced in a queer childhood (Sedgwick 1993, 14). This analysis resonates with my hypothesis that the Leatherman performance is rooted in the feminised shame of not performing the hetero masculine ideal of gender at some point in one’s life, likely during childhood. Consequently, the hypermasculinity of the ‘Leatherman’ can be seen as a response to both sexist and homophobic accusations of being ‘too feminine.’ I explore how shame forms the queer performativity of the ‘Leatherman’ and how it can serve as a ‘structuring fact of identity’ (Sedgwick 1993, 14).

Both Butler and Sedgwick associate performativity with queerness and the affect of shame. Butler observes that ‘queer,’ used as a pejorative slur, contributes to

subject formation through “shaming interpellation” (Butler 2011, 72). Similarly, Sedgwick views shame as an identity-forming practice that is “peculiarly individuating” (Sedgwick 1993, 5). For Butler, “the forming of a subject requires an identification with the normative phantasm of sex” (Butler 2011, introduction xiii). In the Leatherman Performance, this identification implies a failure in approaching masculine ideals. As Sarah Ahmed suggests in her affective approach on shame in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), “shame can become a form of identification in the very failure of an identity”. (Ahmed 2004, 108). In this regard, both performativity and affect theory relate shame to cultural normative ideals that are not sustained.

In this context, I explore the role of shame in shaping gay leather performances. On one hand, shame stemming from nonconformity to heterosexual masculine ideals leads to the cult-like idealization and fetishization of hypermasculinity. On the other hand, Leatherman performance, characterized by the exaggerated use of leather materials, props, and BDSM sexual practices, exposes the precariousness of masculinity, which is perpetually scrutinized for falling short of societal standards. From this perspective, I take BDSM to serve not only as a reminder of the fragility of masculinity but also of our porousness as subjects, as it necessitates the establishment of boundaries, limits, and consent. Following this line of thinking, I explore the intricate aspects of gay leather sexuality using the antisocial strand of queer theory, particularly drawing insights from Leo Bersani’s essay “Is the Rectum a Grave?” (1987). Bersani emphasizes the integral connection between sexual pleasure and power dynamics and connects sexuality with a self-shattering process that undermines the coherence of the subject. Thus, I examine the Leatherman performance of hypermasculinity in the context of BDSM sexual practices, alongside the precariousness of masculinity, and the processes of doing and undoing selves through gender and sexual practices.

3. Playing the Leatherman: Hypermasculinity in Action

This chapter does not purport to serve as a guide for aspiring Leathermen, nor does it intend to provide an exhaustive catalogue of traits, behaviors, or characteristics defining a Leatherman within gay subcultures. Larry Townsend, in his classic *Leatherman's Handbook*, delineates the Leatherman persona as one encapsulating “a male-to-male, sadomasochistic sexual behavior,” while elucidating that “not all people who wear leather clothing are into S/M, nor do all S/M people necessarily wear leather” (Townsend 1972, 15). Meanwhile, Petter Hennen, in “Feeling a Bit under the Leather: Hypermasculinity, Performativity, and the Specter of Starched Chiffon,” situates the Leatherman figure within the domain of gay culture, wherein individuals since the mid-1950s have adopted a hypermasculine performance through “various articles of leather clothing” and a “strong association with rough sex, bondage, discipline, and a variety of sadomasochistic practices” (Hennen 2008, 135).

In my project, I employ my personal embodiment and enactment of the Leatherman persona, drawing from my lived experiences. I consider this material not as a typical model of gay leather fetish performances, but rather as a site to explore the constructedness and performativity of gender, sexuality, and masculinity. Through the lens of Butler’s theory of performativity, the Leatherman can be understood as a leather actor who enters a leather stage and performs their hypermasculine gender and sexuality. As Butler posits “gender reality is performative,” suggesting that gender is real only to the extent that it is performed (Butler 1988, 527). Thus, this chapter sets out to explore how the Leatherman performance is enacted, played and performed within the context of gay leather subcultures focusing on my own auto-ethnographic experiences and observations in exclusive public places of social gathering, as well as inside private spaces of personal encounters.

In light of this context, the experiential insights gained from my involvement in the Amsterdam leather community offer valuable material for analysis in exploring the Leatherman performance. Following my arrival in the Netherlands in September 2023, I was motivated to incorporate elements of my leather and BDSM sexuality into my academic research. Consequently, I began researching the various opportunities for exploring gay fetish sexuality available in the Netherlands. The country boasts a rich fetish community with diverse interests and numerous social gatherings and sex parties,

especially in Amsterdam but also in other cities. I perceived the leather community of Amsterdam and their XXL leather party at club Church, a queer diverse cruising sex club, as emblematic of my fetish interests.

3.1 Masculine Fetishizations: ‘Gear stays on’

The XXL leather party is a monthly event held on Sunday afternoons. I contribute as a volunteer, serving either in the cloakroom or at the bar. In the cloakroom, I assist patrons by providing hangers for their regular attire, allowing them to change into their fetish garments. Within this space, one encounters a typical Leatherman, as we say in our community, who bears resemblance to the hypermasculine drawings of Tom of Finland.² This persona embodies a muscular, hairy individual typically aged over forty, clad in leather biker pants, boots, a leather vest or jacket, and a Muir cap, also known as a Sir’s or Master’s hat. This portrayal draws inspiration from the historical roots of the leather community, tracing back to the motorcycle clubs of the 1950s and evoking the iconic image of Marlon Brando’s character in ‘The Wild One’ (Hennen 2008, 135; Rubin 2000, 67). This embodiment, more typical of a Master, who assumes a dominant role, is often accompanied by a whip, or flog indicating a more rough and sadistic interest in sexual play. However, this old-fashioned and archetypal image of the Leatherman has multiple variations. Divergence from the standard attire may incorporate elements of sportswear, construction worker uniforms, or military and law enforcement garb. Alongside stylistic variation, there are differences in sexual roles and expressions.

In gay leather subcultures and BDSM practices—which include bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadomasochism—there are distinct categorizations regarding sexual roles and fetish preferences. These categorizations originate from broader binary categories in gay culture: Top/bottom, which denote the active (giver) and passive (receiver) sexual roles a person assumes and performs. When a person shifts between these roles, the term vers (short for versatile) is used, indicating enjoyment of both active and passive roles. Within this foundational Top/Bottom

² Tom of Finland, born Touko Laaksonen, was a Finnish artist celebrated for his pioneering homoerotic art, notably his depictions of hypermasculine men. His work, which gained fame under the name Tom of Finland starting in 1957, influenced gay leather and fetish subcultures globally. His drawings, embracing gay male sexuality and identity, continue to resonate as iconic representations within gay culture. (Ramakers, 2002)

categorization, further distinctions arise in gay leather subcultures, such as Master/Slave and Sir/boy, representing Dominance/Submission and/or Sadism/Masochism relationships. These categories reflect the role-playing elements and associated fantasies that are integral to the performance of masculinity within this subculture. However, these terminologies and categorizations cannot fully encapsulate the fluidity and uniqueness of sexual expression in practice. They serve as a fundamental guide for understanding Leatherman performance and the embodiment of masculinity.

In the spectrum of roles within gay leather subcultures, from Master to Slave, the adherence to masculinity is paramount. Put differently, ‘play whatever role you want, dress as you like, since you are masculine.’ That is why the person who assumes the Slave role must exude as much masculinity as possible, often through attire such as leather boots, a leather collar, restraints, and chains, sometimes appearing tougher and more masculine than their Master. At the core of a Master/Slave encounter lies a power exchange dynamic performed within a masculine framework. Viewing the Leatherman performance as a theatrical performance implies the existence of a consistent convention of masculinity that all involved actors must uphold. In this context, there is a masculinized performance of both dominance and submissiveness, marking a notable departure from a perceived “effeminate presentation of self,” as noted by Hennen (Hennen 2008, 145). Even when masculinity seems challenged or undermined through acts of humiliation, degradation, and pain, it remains a defining element of the encounter, play, and overall performance.

The role of the Slave often symbolizes emasculation and feminization, yet this symbolism does not manifest through a feminine performance. Slave is expected to embody strength and virility to endure the ‘use and abuse’ of the Master. Practices such as whipping, flogging, and punching necessitate an hypermasculine performance by the Slave to fulfil the fantasy of two Leathermen engaging in intense and rugged play. The significance of masculinity is even more pronounced during role-switching scenarios where the boundaries between domination and submission blur. By interchangeably assuming roles and practices traditionally associated with masculinity (dominance) and femininity (submissiveness) in heteronormative culture, leather actors highlight and intensify their manliness to maintain the success of the performance.

Drawing from my initial impressions upon entering the XX Leather party, I can assert that it fosters a predominantly male environment, accentuating associations with

conventional heterosexual masculinity. I recall a particular incident while working at the bar when a patron remarked, ‘Do you wear perfume?’ I nodded affirmatively, to which he responded, ‘You know, don’t wear perfume here. Almost nobody likes perfumes. We are here for plain, authentic male scents.’ I chuckled upon hearing this, yet I found it to hold a central significance within the context of the Leatherman performance, which revolves around the fetishization of masculinity. This anecdote brought to mind a poem by the Greek gay poet Dinos Christianopoulos who underlines a supposed authentic form of maleness untouched by the corrosive forces of urban culture.

‘To a rural man’

Please don't use perfumes. I like the smell of your body. There's no fragrance more beautiful than your sweat. I want to taste the saltiness of your chest, to inhale the musk of your armpits, to be immersed in the dampness of your thighs.

Please don't use perfumes. Why are you in such a hurry to forget the village?

What do you need those colognes for? They will insidiously ruin your masculinity.

Please don't use perfumes. Amidst a thousand dandies, I searched and suffered to find a man. Stay as you are: an unspoiled rural man.

In this poem, the gay poet addresses a presumed heterosexual male of rural origins, making a direct plea to refrain from using perfumes. This rejection of artificial scents in favor of the natural odor of the body sets the tone for the speaker’s appreciation of raw masculinity. The poet values the smell of the body, celebrating the authenticity it represents. Sweat, typically associated with exertion and physical labor, becomes a symbol of attractiveness and allure. The “saltiness” of the chest and the “musk” of the armpits create a desirable combination, evoking unfiltered, primal masculinity. The poet questions the man’s desire to distance himself from his rural past by using colognes, which threaten to erode the authentic rural masculinity embodied in the man. Conversely, the poet asks him to remain as he is, “an unspoiled rural man,” a phrase that encapsulates the poet’s yearning for a masculinity untouched by urbanization and the modernization of the city. In this regard, there is an idealization of rural masculinity that constructs an idyllic Eden in the gay imaginary, as suggested by David Bell (Bell 2000, 547). Such idealization finds resonance in my observations at leather gatherings I attend, where there is a fetishization of figures like the leather biker, policeman, and sergeant. These personas exemplify the fetishization of a supposed hetero masculinity unspoiled by “the feminizing effects of civilization” (Hennen 2008, 140).

Allow me to share another personal story. I vividly recall my sexual encounter with Lucas, who adeptly embodied the Leatherman persona. We played in his self-constructed dungeon, replete with the perfect dark atmosphere. A sling hung in the center, and a chair with restraints awaited my submission to the Leatherman. During our encounter, there was a hyperbolic use of gear, including leather masks and boots. At some point, after several hours of playing, talking, and relaxing, we began discussing our fantasies and engaged in enacting them. The fantasy of ‘the construction worker’ emerged, and Lucas opened a trunk filled with original working boots bought from second-hand bazaars. It was the smell and history of ‘authentic’ maleness that created an unprecedented sexual tension and climax. While the narrative of this scene diverges from Christianopoulos’ poem depicting rural masculinity, it nevertheless highlights the enduring allure and potency associated with a supposed authentic maleness, influenced by various factors, including male scent. The figure of the construction worker embodies traditional notions of masculinity, as exemplified by the genuine worker boots worn by ‘a real man,’ presumably a heterosexual individual in the construction profession.

Reflecting on this experience, I maintain that there is a fetishization of homosocial scenarios that culminate in sexual encounters. For instance, at leather gatherings in Club Church, I have observed Leathermen engaging in conversations, drinking beer, and smoking in an all-male camaraderie. These leather gatherings can be viewed as homosexual enactments of homosocial fraternities or men’s clubs. I employ the term ‘homosocial’ as conceptualized and popularized by Sedgwick, which refers to “social bonds between persons of the same sex”. This encompasses “male bonding activities” and is often marked by a significant degree of homophobia (Sedgwick 1985, 2). The term also encompasses the notion of desire, indicating a continuum between homosocial and homosexual interactions. (ibidem). Gay men often draw from homosocial scenarios to engage in homosexual practices for pleasure. This phenomenon entails a gay fantasy and sexualization of male activities within exclusive male spaces. For instance, in ‘Free Willie,’ a naked bar in Amsterdam, there is a weekly pool competition, while in the historic gay bar ‘Spijker,’ the pool table serves as an integral part of its decor and allure. The ambiance of pool and beer creates an old-fashioned male atmosphere, establishing a homosocial environment reminiscent of spaces where men are isolated, and women are excluded. The difference in this gay context is that after the pool activities, patrons can move to the cruising area and engage

in homosexual acts. Thus, one significant aspect of my formulation, 'we play men,' is evident here in the embodied and reenactment of homosocial and heteromale cultural norms in gender expression and social life, aimed at achieving pleasure and sexual gratification.

Martine Levine's sociological and ethnographic analysis of gay masculinity during the 1970s and 1980s suggests that gays constructed a "homosexual clone" as a manifestation of "hypermasculine sexuality" to counter their stigmatization as "failed men" or "sissies" (Levine 1998, 5). The phrase "homosexual clone" implies an imitation of a supposed authentic heterosexual masculinity, thereby raising questions of originality and imitation. Expanding upon Butler's theory of gender performativity, wherein "gay is to straight not as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy" (Butler 2002, 41), the Leatherman figure emerges as an incessant enactment of copied performances and fantasies.

However, while Leatherman performance is based on hetero-male representations, it is also co-created through homo-male representations found in gay male magazines, pornography, brochures, bars, and various aspects of gay culture. Tom of Finland's homoerotic artistic works stand as exemplars for the Leatherman performance. These artworks depict hypermasculine men participating in sexual *mise en scène*, creating a queer manifestation of macho masculinity. In this regard, the performance of Leatherman masculinity necessitates alignment not only with hetero-male constructs but also with the evolving norms of gay culture. For instance, the experience of attending a leather bar or fetish event for the first time may evoke anxiety regarding the successful embodiment of desired personas, such as a Master or a Slave. Within these exclusive spaces, we adhere stylistic choices, behavioral patterns, and established codes to express our preferences and establish our presence. As we immerse ourselves in the subculture, we learn the rules, such as exemplified in the aforementioned incident of my wrong choice to wear perfume within the leather bar, which tainted the 'authentic' male scents and undermined fantasies and pleasure.

In this context, the Leatherman emerges as a product of both heteronormativity and patriarchy but manifests itself as an unfaithful successor, drawing a parallel with Donna Haraway's conception of her cyborg myth. Haraway portrays the cyborg as the "illegitimate offspring of militarism, patriarchal capitalism, and state socialism." (Haraway 1991, 151). This analogy suggests that the Leatherman performance, while rooted in patriarchal masculinity and macho aesthetics, undergoes a redefinition as a

queer expression. As Levine aptly observes, there is a “reenactment of traditional masculinity in a new kind of camp”. (Levine 1998, 29). Consequently, the Leatherman performance shares notable similarities with drag performances.

Hennen characterizes the Leatherman performance as “leather drag” and utilizes Butler’s theory of gender performativity to investigate whether the Leatherman persona reinforces or subverts heteronormative gender norms (Hennen 2008, 169). Examining both perspectives, he aligns with Sedgwick’s assertion that “the bottom line is generally the same: kinda subversive, kinda hegemonic” (Sedgwick 1993, 15). In this vein, I analyze the intricate conventions necessary to embody the Leatherman persona. The significance of gear, particularly leather attire and props is crucial. Removing the leather from a Leatherman would fundamentally alter the performance of masculinity, resulting in a different expression of gender and sexuality.

The common phrase among Leathermen in gay dating applications, ‘gear stays on,’ emphasizes the importance of leather material. Sexual gratification is closely tied to the fetishization of leather material as an integral component of the performance of masculinity. Hennen underscores the profound erotic power that leather holds for gay men, emphasizing its strong association with masculinity. While a leather jacket may serve as practical protection for a heterosexual biker, for gay men, it transforms into a powerful symbol against “the stigma of effeminacy” (Hennen 2008, 140). In other words, the sexualized body is the dressed one and not the naked one. Without gear, the leather performance of masculinity is diminished. Leather and masculinity exist in an interplay of gender performance and sexual pleasure.

Consequently, the redefinition of masculinity within gay leather subcultures diverges from a fundamentally subversive approach to masculinity. Instead, it is rooted in the functional centrality of leather and gear to the sexual and erotic ‘success’ of these performances. In this context, the phenomenon of ‘playing men’ emerges within our homo spaces wherein traditional elements of masculinity are appropriated to construct a unique form of masculinity. This distinctive manifestation sharply contrasts with prevailing heteronormative standards. The concurrent celebration and undermining of a supposed hetero masculinity are integral to gender and sexual expression within our leather spaces.

3.2 Masculine Realness: ‘Give it like Man & Take it like Man’

Gay leather performances showcase the celebration of ‘hetero masculinity’ through an idealization of a supposed ‘straight man,’ encapsulated in emblematic phrases commonly used during sexual encounters, such as ‘give it like a man’ and ‘take it like a man.’ The metaphorical use of ‘like a man’ presents a contradictory pattern for the leather actor. On one hand, these phrases indicate a leather actor engaged in sexual acts that defy traditional heterosexual expectations of masculinity. On the other hand, they imply that the performance must align with and uphold masculine hetero ideals. The Leatherman navigates this antithetical schema through hypermasculinity, performing non-heterosexual practices in a distinctly manly manner to reconcile the infringement of hetero norms. In this context, there exists a heterophantasmatic script of fantasies that traverse Leatherman performance, aiming to embody an unattainable ideal of hetero masculine ‘realness’.

‘Realness’ within the context of drag performance signifies an idealized form of gender performance shaped by heteronormative societal constructs that rely on binary, essentialist notions of male and female. According to Butler, “what determines the effect of realness is the ability to compel belief, to produce the naturalized”. (Butler 2011, 88) This effect is achieved through embodying and reiterating norms, “a morphological ideal that remains the standard which regulates the performance, but which no performance fully approximates.” (ibidem). In this regard, ‘realness’ refers to the drag performer’s ability to convincingly pass as the persona associated with the category they are portraying, such as a businesswoman or a 1950s housewife. Similarly, within the realm of Leatherman ‘realness,’ the emphasis is placed on successfully ‘passing’ as a macho male, with the leather attire and gear playing a pivotal role in achieving this ‘passing.’ In this context, the concept of ‘realness’ adheres to prescribed societal and cultural norms. These norms, which validate ‘realness’ within drag culture, form the framework through which “certain sanctioned fantasies and imaginaries are insidiously elevated as the parameters of realness” (ibid, 89).

The concept of Leatherman performance often resides within the realm of fantasy—an idealized version of masculinity that diverges notably from my observations in leather bars, gatherings, and personal encounters. In other words, asking if somebody is a ‘real’ Leatherman ultimately signifies an assessment of how closely he aligns with one’s fantasies. There is a performative playfulness that gay Leathermen

engage in, and it is imperative to recognize. Otherwise, failure to grasp this aspect may lead to disillusionment regarding the performance of the Leatherman within gay leather subcultures. As GWL Kamel describes, a common complaint among Leathermen is “the disappointing level of masculinity among fellow gays.” One of his informants aptly describes this disappointment as having “to settle for feminine men” (Kamel 1980, 185). This highlights a significant discrepancy between idealized hypermasculine fantasies such as Tom of Finland’s homoerotic art of large, muscular bodies adorned in leather and the manifestation of masculinity within gay leather subcultures. It is noteworthy that Tom of Finland himself expressed that his art represents “dreams of ultimate masculinity.”³

The manifestation of leather masculinity can be interpreted as an illustration of gender performativity, as conceptualized by Butler. In Butler’s framework, gender is viewed as performative rather than expressive of an inherent essence or reality. As Butler suggests “genders, then, can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent.” (Butler 1988, 528). However, the Leatherman performance, by engaging in an interplay of masculine realness, exhibits a reductionist and essentialist undertone characterized by an idealized notion of ‘authentic’ maleness. This engenders a paradox within leather masculinity performance. While emphasizing the constructedness of gender, it simultaneously adheres to hetero idealized and essentialized perceptions of archetypical maleness, which manifests itself as fetishization, desire, and a cult for hypermasculinity.

In March 2024, I attended one of the biggest gay fetish events and gatherings in Europe, called Darklands, which took place in Antwerp. Lasting four days, it was filled with social events, ranging from seminars on BDSM relationships, inclusivity, and mental health to sex parties, dance parties, fetish pageants, and the crowning of Mister Fetish World 2024. Walking through the corridors of the events and observing thousands of men embracing their fetish selves, from pups to diaper lovers, from motorcyclists to airline stewards, from slaves to masters, a wide spectrum of masculine performances unfolded before me. If performativity implies that individuals enact their gender and sexuality in ways distinct from their peers and that “one does one’s body

³ “My whole life long I have done nothing but interpret my dreams of ultimate masculinity, and draw them.” — Tom of Finland (Ramakers 2002, 119)

and, differently from one's contemporaries" (Butler 1998, 272), then Darklands was replete with performative acts.

I recall observing two men clad in leather biker uniforms and helmets, their bodies entirely concealed from head to toe, leaving no trace of exposed flesh. They emanated sexual tension and a heightened sense of masculinity as they hugged each other, touched their clad bodies, and brought their helmets close as if they were being kissed. There was an accentuated fetishization of the leather biker persona. These individuals evoked a resemblance to non-human cyborgs depicted in science fiction films, reminiscent of Amanda Fernbach's examination of "hyper-phallic cyborg masculinity" (Fernbach 2000, 238). Fernbach argues that hypermasculine cyborgs characters, such as the Terminator, exhibit a "hyperbolic and spectacular quality of technomascularity, defined through multiplying phallic parts," thereby highlighting the notion that "masculinity is an artificial and constructed performance that always relies on props" (ibid, 239).

In this regard, the masculinity of the Leatherman, contingent upon props, particularly those made of leather, exemplifies the constructedness of masculinity as it is based on specific cultural and material conditions. Fernbach argues that while the cyborg's technomascularity may uphold traditional models of masculinity, it simultaneously challenges prevailing patriarchal and heterosexist norms that often assert "masculinity as self-evident and natural" (ibid, 238). In this regard, the performance of the Leatherman proceeds to a redefinition of certain recognizable and presumed hetero masculine 'traits.' This redefinition is not characterized by outright subversion but rather by generating alternative effects, such as how traits traditionally associated with heterosexuality can evoke a 'homosexual charge.'

To conclude, this chapter has examined the various ways in which hypermasculinity is performed within gay leather subcultures. Employing Butler's theory of performativity, the focus shifted towards the constructedness of gender as opposed to the mere expression of a pre-existing identity. This exploration encompasses the concept of a theatrical performance enacted by a leather actor, who embodies gender and sexuality within a specific public or private leather stage. Central to the Leatherman performance is the enactment of 'masculinity realness' fantasies, deeply entrenched in heteronormative ideals. By drawing parallels with drag performance, the Leatherman persona highlights the performativity of gender and underscores its relationality to societal norms. However, the persistent fantasy of 'the straight man' engenders

essentialist undertones, leading to a coexisting paradox of both idealization and subversion of traditional hetero-masculine norms.

4. Beyond Leather Hypermasculinity: Shameful Desires and Precarious Formations

This chapter explores the hypermasculinity embodied in Leatherman performances, with a specific focus on how gender performativity offers insights about subject formation. Butler argues that performative acts possess “the power to produce or materialize subjectivating effects” (Butler 2011, 70). While the theatrical parallel of an actor who performs on stage presupposes the existence of a subject, for Butler, there is no subject that pre-exists gender performance. Instead, the subject is co-created with gender through performative acts. Consequently, Butler suggests that “the social agent” can be perceived “as an object of constitution rather than the subject of constitutive” (Butler 1988, 519). This prompts my exploration of the Leatherman performance not only as a ‘leather actor’ who acts on a ‘leather stage’ but also as a subject being formed through this performance.

I often express that I came to Amsterdam to find, live, and embrace my ‘fetish self.’ This statement is juxtaposed with the main hypothesis of this project, which proposes that we begin to ‘play men’ during childhood due to the experience of queer shame for not conforming to masculine ideals, and we continue to ‘play men’ throughout adulthood within the context of pleasure and sexual play. In this regard, I explore my desire for leather hypermasculinity in relation to cultural and social norms and expectations regarding gender and sexuality. Drawing from queer and affect theories, I propose that the ostensibly ‘extreme’ sexual practices of the Leatherman performances, which include fetishism and BDSM practices, offer broader insights into subject formation. They illuminate how a sense of self is composed and enacted through prisms of sexuality and gender. In this context, the Leatherman performance emerges as a site to explore some of the constitutive forces and elements that shape a self, and in this case with a focus on subject formation in an environment that is marked by shaming of masculinity that does not conform to norms.

I utilize Sedgwick’s theorization of the formative role that shame occupies in relation to subject formation. Sedgwick posits that “shame is a bad feeling attaching to what one is: one, therefore, is something, in experiencing shame” (Sedgwick 1993, 12). Additionally, I incorporate Sara Ahmed’s affective understanding of shame, wherein she emphasizes that “shame can be experienced as the affective cost of not following the scripts of normative existence” (Ahmed 2014, 107). My analysis delves into the

profound impact of shame on gay individuals and communities, particularly within the gay leather subcultures. I highlight the significance of leather as a shield against femininity and associated shame, and as a performative act that exposes leather actors to a form of self-vulnerability, notably manifested in BDSM sexual practices within the Leatherman performance.

BDSM encounters, often described as “boundary play,” involve the exploration of personal bodily and physical limits (Holmes et al. 2021, 2). In this context, I explore the complexities of boundaries in gay leather sexuality through the antisocial strand in queer theory, drawing on the work of Leo Bersani specifically. Bersani emphasizes the “anticommunal, antiegalitarian, antinurturing, antiloving” aspects of sex and highlights the inseparable link between sexual pleasure and the dynamics of power (Bersani 2010, 22). He, in other words, conceptualizes boundaries less as social transgressions and more as indicators of the constructedness and, consequently, porousness of a supposed bounded and composed self. Against this backdrop, I examine the desire for and the performance of Leatherman hypermasculinity in relation to BDSM sexual practices, and the precariousness of selves.

4.1 Bound by Shame: The Complexity of Leather Desires

I close my eyes and try to describe how I fantasize and perform hypermasculinity. I am in the sex club. I am outside the darkroom where there is plenty of light. I clearly see a man in huge rubber boots that cover almost his entire thigh. He is wearing a leather costume resembling workwear, giving the impression that he just emerged from a gold mine. He wears long leather gloves similar to those used for constructing pipes in the streets. I am dressed in a much lighter attire, consisting of a harness, boots, leather pants, and a metal chain around my neck. I have not assumed my usual submissive attire. I seem to be more in the Master’s position. I am not sure if I like it. I am not sure what I want from him or what he wants from me. There is agony. I do not know what to expect. Our bodies have no roles, no significations. Someone must take the initiative to construct the scene. Without assuming roles or techniques of sexual pleasure, we are almost unintelligible bodies. We are in a liminal exploration of bodies and sensations. We play. We touch each other. He hits me in the stomach, and I punch him in the face. There is sexual tension. We are engaged in a game centered around strength and masculinity. Is there a definitive winner in this contest? If so, what

does the victor gain? But what do I desire more as I engage in this? To submit to him or to make him submit to me? Are we fighting as if we were boys at school? A scenario of homosocial interaction is being acted out and generates satisfaction and pleasure. Can the Leatherman performance be seen as a sexualized manifestation of a heteronormative social script that I once struggled to conform to?

In her analysis of queer performativity, Sedgwick, explores the affect of shame, particularly its “illocutionary force” in the phrase “shame on you” (Sedgwick 1993, 4). Within this framework, queer performativity refers to “a strategy for the production of meaning and being, in relation to the affect of shame and to the later and related fact of stigma” (ibid, 11). Building upon Sedgwick’s theoretical foundations, I propose an interpretation rooted in my personal experience. This assertion posits that the experience of shame, stemming from a failure to conform to prevailing masculine ideals and compounded by experiences of ridicule and marginalization, has played a pivotal role in shaping my sense of self in relation to norms of gender and sexuality and that this shaping, in turn, expresses its construction in my gender and sexual performances.

In this regard, the experience of failed masculinity in a queer childhood engenders the affect of shame, stemming from a perceived lack of acceptance and love from male peers and boys perpetuating bullying behaviors. However, this conceptualization gives rise to a paradox, wherein the act of bullying concurrently serves as a form of attention, interest, and even underlying affection or sexual tension. Drawing from Sedgwick’s analysis of Henry James, who articulates his process of “cathecting” or “eroticizing” shame as a means of establishing a loving relationship with “queer or ‘compromising’ youth” (Sedgwick 1993, 8) I speculate here that, in my case, shame engenders a sexual idealization and fetishization of purported heteronormative masculinity, culminating in the embodiment of a hypermasculine Leatherman performance.

Bersani posits that the “gay commitment to machismo” (Bersani 2010, 15) among some gays entails “the potential for a loving identification with the gay man’s enemies” (ibidem). My interest in this argument is not aimed at analyzing the deeper psychological meanings of my sexual desires. Rather, it serves to underscore the complexities of leather desires. As Bersani aptly points out, attraction towards men is not merely a superficial physical preference devoid of cultural influences. Instead, it is shaped by “a socially determined and pervasive definition of what it means to be a man” (ibidem). In this sense, my formulation ‘we play men’ carries cultural meanings and

sexual investments related to concept of masculinity. The male body, encountered outside the darkroom, transcends being a mere leather surface of pleasure per se. It signifies various cultural definitions of maleness incorporated in the Leatherman performance, waiting to be enacted for pleasure. It appears that hetero acculturation during childhood, experienced by some non-conforming boys generates an appeal for masculine self-presentation and simultaneously a sexual desire for males who perform traditional notions of masculinity, as exemplified in the Leatherman performance.

According to Levine, in childhood, assigned males at birth are socialized in a homosocial setting where conforming to traditional masculine roles is praised as manliness, while those who don't adhere are negatively labeled as 'faggots' and face contempt. However, "this nonconformity does not signify non-enculturation but rather non-performance" (Levine 1998, 16). In this regard, although deviating from traditional masculine performance, they are still acculturated through various practices such as bullying by peers, or punishment through authority figures like fathers and teachers. The gender role nonconformity elicits harsh sanctions. To avoid facing these penalties, according to Levine, individuals labeled as 'sissies' distance themselves from feminine activities and adopt masculine behaviors, striving to conform to traditional notions of masculinity. (ibidem).

Can Leatherman performance be seen as a continuation of the process of shielding oneself from femininity shaming? Feeling shame often coincides with a sense of wrongdoing, as proposed by Ahmed, leading one to try to "expel the badness" (Ahmed 2014, 104). Within the context of Leatherman performance, the concept of 'badness' becomes synonymous with femininity. In this sense, my decision to wear perfume in the leather bar and mask the natural male odors of my body can be seen as a self-feminizing practice. This 'wrong' choice is reminiscent of Christianopoulos' poem, where he rejects artificial scents of colognes in favor of the 'real scent of raw masculinity.' In this regard, there exists a valorization of distancing oneself from any semblance of femininity. However, the endeavor to conform to heteronormative masculinity remains constantly in precarious position. Aspects such as my soft-spoken voice, relaxed gestures, and light footsteps consistently threaten to undermine the facade of an idealized heterosexual masculinity.

Bersani (2010) employs the term "leather queen" to describe gay men who adopt the macho leather style, emphasizing their suspicion that they may not achieve "the real article," which connotes an assumed 'authentic' machismo or masculinity

(Bersani 2010, 14). Through my observations within the leather bar, I assert that Leathermen earnestly strive to embody idealized notions of macho masculinity. However, the 'leather actor' finds himself simultaneously positioned both on and off the metaphorical 'leather stage,' oscillating between machismo and queen expressions. This fluidity arises from the fact that the leather script, based on traditional notions of masculinity, already contains gaps and discrepancies.

In this light, Leatherman performance can be interpreted as a celebration of masculine discordance. It serves as a flamboyant response aimed at subverting "the very physicality of shame," as suggested by Ahmed, which involves "feeling exposed before others and attempting to shield oneself from their gaze" (Ahmed 2014, 103-104). The hyperbole, hypermasculinity, and theatricality of Leatherman performance, often accompanied by props and gear, serve to emphasize one's presence and identity rather than conceal them. It is an act of visibility and self-affirmation. Within the leather subculture, spaces such as leather bars, gatherings, and encounters serve as communal locus where shared shame and the precarity of masculinity bring us together. Ahmed contends that individual shame is intertwined with the community precisely because the ideals that have failed are what bind others together (Ahmed 2014, 108).

But when you want to kiss, when you long for a hug, when you desire to release sexual energy, you do not think about shame, social stigma, fear, or the victims of a disease. You just want to make love. You want to touch, smell, feel. You want to live. But what happens when two or more male bodies touch each other? What happens when they ask each other 'condom or are you on PrEP?' Some seconds before penetration, or in this space where desire takes shape and is acted upon, scenes of formative socialization are also present. The bullying days at school, the impermissible gaze over the man on the subway, and the societal accusations to members of our community who were condemned for "promiscuity," "anal sex," and "an insatiable, unstoppable female sexuality," deserving to die of AIDS (Bersani 2010, 29).

Suddenly, I sing "when I look back upon my life, it's always with a sense of shame, I've always been the one to blame, for everything I long to do..."⁴ I blink my eyes and touch the naked body in front of me. The sick bodies belong to the past. Life goes on. I choose happiness instead of misery. But the collective trauma of the victims

⁴ Lyrics from the song "It's a Sin" by the English pop duo "Pet Shop Boys" from their second studio album, "Actually" (1987).

of AIDS is still present without even saying a word. It is the heritage of all gay men around the world. However, when I am engaging in sexual pleasure, I do not want to speak about it. I do not want to share the fear. Although, at some point—before, during, or after the sexual encounter, always entangled with it—I am confronted with that unresolved trauma. Whether I am retro-positive or not, whether I am on PrEP or not, whether I use a condom or not, this past of the victims of pleasure is my legacy. I cannot define (my) gayness irrespective of AIDS and shame. Both are constitutive parts. Either as discourses or subject formation processes. The shaping force of AIDS and shame creates a specific cultural context and generational circumstance as the background of my approach to gayness and leather performances. In another cultural context or era, gayness may signify something else. However, for me, the contextualization of gayness is synonymous with shame, AIDS, and the fear of pleasure.

4.2 Embracing Precariousness: BDSM Intimacies and Selves Undone

The Leatherman performance is closely associated with BDSM sexual practices. However, not all Leathermen engage in such activities. During a Leather night at ‘Dirty Dicks’ bar in Amsterdam, I met a Leatherman who bore a striking resemblance to the hypermasculine drawings of Tom of Finland. However, as he informed me during our conversation, he was into ‘vanilla sex,’ which stands at the opposite end of the BDSM spectrum. He mentioned that he enjoys the leather homosocial camaraderie, but during sexual encounters, he prefers to be naked without wearing leather gear and in a soft, gentle, and relaxing mode. This experience contrasts sharply with my understanding of gay leather subcultures, which often intertwine leather fetishism with BDSM practices.

BDSM is a comprehensive term that encompasses various practices and themes represented by each letter in the acronym BDSM (B: Bondage/Discipline, D: Dominance/Submission, SM: Sadomasochism). These umbrella terms encapsulate some of the most common associations and practices within BDSM, “such restraint via bondage; humiliation via language, degradation, and watersports; masculinity via leather and roughness; and fear via threat of violence and pain.” (Kamel 1980, 173). BDSM sexual practices are often perceived as non-normative, perverse, abnormal, and aberrant, indicating a transgression of socially accepted notions of sexuality. However,

an examination of BDSM through Bersani's perspective transcends the conventional understanding of BDSM as merely transgressive of social boundaries. Bersani's framework views desire and sex as drives that expose the porousness of the bounded self, a concept he terms as the "proud subject" (Bersani 2010, 29).

Reflecting on a personal experience, I remember being on the top floor of a Dutch house in The Hague. A bedroom had been transformed into a dungeon to act out our leather and BDSM fantasies. The Leatherman asked me, 'Do you like restraint?' and I replied, 'I do.' He then inquired, 'How experienced are you?' and he presented a large leather item resembling a sack. 'Do you know what it is?' he asked. 'I have seen it in porn,' I answered. 'So, do you want to enter? The choice is yours. I can put it back in the closet.' 'I want to,' I answered, and he unfolded the sleepsack on the bed. I got naked, and I 'entered' the sleepsack. It was something like a leather sleeping bag and a straitjacket. My entire body was covered from the neck to the feet. Two zippers zipped and left exposed my genitals. Eight leather laces were tightened to secure me inside. An intense pressure across my body induced a sense of complete helplessness. With my arms and hands secured within inner sleeves at my sides, I was unable to reach or touch anything. A gas mask was placed on my face, and I breathed through a plastic tube. My genitals and my breathing were controlled by the Leather Master. I was completely vulnerable to him.

In the anecdote, it is evident that BDSM sexual practices are characterized by a certain level of risk and require consent and respect. Failure to uphold these principles poses a significant danger of causing harm or distress to individuals participating in such activities. This leather scene of the sleepsack serves as emblematic of practices often deemed transgressive according to common societal perceptions of sexuality. However, according to Bersani, such practices, particularly anal sex in his analysis, do not reflect sex negativity nor do they bring about homophobic aggression because they challenge social norms but rather because they challenge the very concept of the self. He argues that there is a "heterosexual association of anal sex with self-annihilation" (Bersani 2010, 29). The act of being enclosed in a sleepsack can thus be interpreted as a form of self-annihilation, emphasizing the fragile boundaries of one's assumed cohesive self. Consequently, BDSM sexual practices in gay Leather performances are often considered non-normative not because they deviate from conventional sexual acts but because they represent a divergent form of existence, expressing a form of drive

that is always at odds with the concept of life encapsulated in “proud subjectivity,” as Bersani notes (*ibidem*).

In other words, and following Bersani, the stigma and negative preconceptions surrounding BDSM persist due to its capacity to highlight the precariousness of the subject. To completely submit to another person can be considered an act of “disintegration and humiliation of the self,” as Bersani suggests when exploring how sexuality can unite individuals into “a self-shattering and solipsistic jouissance that drives them apart” (Bersani 2010, 24; 30). Experiencing humiliation, degradation, and asphyxiation while being inside the sleepsack and relinquishing all control of my genitals and breath, over myself, to the Leather Master can be understood as a self-shattering experience. My suggestion here is that these practices of humiliation and complete submittal to the power of another should not be perceived through conventional social and cultural criteria for ab/normal sex, but rather as serving a purpose within the context of gay sex.

These practices might, in other words, demonstrate a refusal to succumb to the societal notion that one should feel ashamed of their gay sexuality. In this regard, BDSM sexual practices within gay leather subcultures can be seen as a form of staging of a kind of shattering of the self that is bounded and shaped by shame. Participation in Leatherman performances can be interpreted as a way to actively engage in a process of self-shattering as conceptualized by Bersani, wherein the sexual instinct, the drive to life, intertwines always with the death drive, “that undoes the self, releases the self from the drive for mastery and coherence and resolution” (Halberstam 2008, 140). In this regard, Bersani highlights the often-overlooked “value in powerlessness” (Bersani 2010, 24) and I, in turn, highlight it as a valuable insight about subject formation.

During a BDSM session, the thin line between consensual pleasure and potential abuse can easily be crossed, a fact that highlights the importance of responsibility in sexual interactions. At this point, I want to clarify that I am not advocating for sexual practices that disregard boundaries. In my dating application profiles, I often use the phrase ‘Consent is the key to pleasure.’ These boundaries of consent are different from those discussed in my analysis regarding societal boundaries and boundaries of the self, although their underlying connections are abundant. The value of this clarification lies in the perspective that I will immerse myself in self-humiliation, pain, suffering, and shattering only to the extent that my limits are respected. In other words, the fundamental element of BDSM, which involves pushing and transgressing limits,

brings pleasure only when consent is maintained. Put differently, I explore my limits within my limits. However, the fact that limits within BDSM are constantly renegotiated and challenged underscores the precariousness central to BDSM practices, where the interplay between limits and their transgression is foundational. As articulated by Foucault: “a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable, and reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows” (Foucault 1987, 73).

BDSM can serve as a reminder of our interconnectedness and interdependence. In this context, certain BDSM practices involving heightened risk underscore the precariousness of the self and the body. But whose precarity is at stake? Is it solely the individual who submits to the Leather Master in a precarious condition? Does the ability of the Submissive/Slave to say ‘stop’ at any point and terminate the interaction place the entire encounter in a perpetual state of precarity? In this regard, is the Master’s authority always under question? Does both Master’s and Slave’s fragility render the performance under precarious conditions? For instance, in a role-play game of Sir/Fag(fagot), Sir assumes a hypermasculine, fetishized version of masculinity, while Fag assumes a shattered version of masculinity. The masculinity of the Fag is denied and rejected, and Fag becomes attractive because of its capacity for being ‘less of a man.’ In other words, there is a pleasurable exploration and climax by placing masculinity in a precarious condition for both Sir and Fag. When being in this role play game, I usually embody the Fag role. I wear a chastity device and only experience anal orgasm. He calls me a Fag and I call him Sir. I enjoy being ‘less of a man’, and he enjoys having somebody who is ‘less of a man.’ Masculinity is simultaneously fetishized in Sir’s embodiment of the ‘real man’ but also undermined by Fag’s embodiment of a ‘less of a man’.

This perspective aligns with Bersani’s contention regarding homosexual encounters, that “if the rectum is the grave in which the masculine ideal of proud subjectivity is buried, then it should be celebrated for its very potential for death” (Bersani 2010, 29). This celebration of ‘killing’ masculinity within BDSM practices can be seen as a deliberate act of self-shattering, challenging the shame associated with not conforming to societal expectations of masculinity. As Bersani notes, male homosexuality advertises the risk of the sexual itself as the risk of self- dismissal, of losing sight of the self (Bersani 2010, 30).

To conclude, this chapter has examined how Leatherman performance is shaped by queer shame, utilizing BDSM sexual practices to underscore the precarious formation of the subject. Leading up to this, I explored how Leatherman performance navigates a journey from shame and failed masculinity to a fetishized celebration of hypermasculinity, symbolized by the leather material. Here, heteronormative expectations, societal stigmatization, and the quest for ‘authentic male’ gender expression and sexual object meld within the leather subculture. However, the fluidity and ambiguity of roles and sexual practices within Leatherman performances highlight the tension between conforming to traditional ideals of masculinity and embracing a queer, non-conforming identity.

5. Conclusion

One day in May 2024, I found myself in Rotterdam to serve two Sirs. During our sexual encounter, I thoroughly enjoyed the experience. I was their slave for three hours, and then I left and returned home feeling relaxed. The next day, a friend suggested that these couples were using me for their pleasure without investing in me, implying that I should seek a partner for myself. My friend's perspective had me wonder whether it reflects a psychological assessment of my sexuality or merely projects cultural assumptions regarding 'normal monogamy' prevalent in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships.

The Sirs in question refer to each other as husbands while actively participating in BDSM practices, attending fetish parties, events, and gatherings together, and engaging in sexual activities with others instead of adhering to traditional norms of monogamy and child-rearing. Is this a form of freedom of expression and an alternative to the prescribed gender "happiness script" (Ahmed 2010, 59)? If so, to what extent does it diverge from societal norms? How do the gender and sexual performances of Leathermen and BDSM practitioners offer broader insights into culturally imposed norms concerning gender, sexuality, and subject formation? This is one of the underlying queries that has preoccupied this thesis.

Once again, I drew upon personal experience to begin this concluding chapter from an autoethnographic perspective. During the thesis writing process, I often asked myself, what is academic writing? Can such personal narratives be considered academic? How do they differ from autobiographical books focused on queerness and shame? Academia, unlike theatre and art, provided me with a safe space for self-expression. I do not contend that the sole purpose of academic writing is self-expression. However, for me, it served as a crucial starting point. Throughout this rigorous process, I discovered the freedom to articulate my thoughts. I constructed a deeply personal academic narrative centered on topics of gay shame and non-normative gay sexualities, which was incredibly liberating for me. But does this piece of academic text hold something more than a personal narrative of a queer experience?

How the personal is becoming political is always a question for me. I do not feel that I have expressed something radically new or not already stated within academic discourse. However, I feel that I have articulated something very personal with my hypothesis, which is situated in the interconnections between masculinity, queerness,

shame, subject formation, gay leather performances, and BDSM sexual practices. As I write these words, I simultaneously think, ‘Oh! All these words are me. Thank you, academia, for the psychotherapy!’ My personal journey within gay leather subcultures is a transition from shame to pride, a celebration, and a deconstruction of traditional, supposed hetero masculinity. Is this a utopian interpretation of my gender and sexual performance?

I used the formulation ‘we play men’ to situate and explore gay leather performances. I hypothesized that non-gender-conforming assigned males at birth engage in ‘playing men’ acts as a survival mechanism to distance themselves from societal shame and stigma associated with deviation from masculine norms. According to my hypothesis, this performance begins during childhood and continues into adulthood through various manifestations in social life, such as ‘straight-acting,’ ‘decent,’ and homonormative gender performances among gay men. While an approach centered on ‘gayness and homonormativity’ would constitute a different research project, my research focused on gay leather performances and sexuality, primarily through BDSM practices. Delving into the phenomenon of ‘playing men’ within gay leather subcultures, I analyzed its manifestation through the performativity of gender and masculinity. Furthermore, I investigated the association between sexual pleasure, and gay leather desires for hypermasculinity.

The foundational theoretical framework for my study was Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity. However, it is worth noting that claiming to implement theory of performativity in an academic text is a risky statement. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes, gender can be viewed “as a form of performativity. But what that claim, in turn, ‘means’ is performatively dependent on the uses given to it” (Sedgwick 1993, 1). Building on this insight, I examined performativity through two distinct lenses. First, I explored gender and masculinity as performative acts, drawing parallels with theatrical performances by ‘leather actors.’ Secondly, I delved into the constitutive elements of performativity, focusing on its role in the formation of subjectivity. Drawing on my personal insights from leather spaces, which are often considered underground and marginalized, I observed a complex manifestation of masculinity related to heteronorms. This was highlighted by a certain degree of fetishization and subversion, as exemplified in various Leatherman performances.

My exploration of gay leather performances aligns closely with Bell Hooks’ assertion that “gay men share with straight men the same notions about acceptable

masculinity” (Hooks 2004, 33), an observation that further complicates the exploration of masculinity within gay subcultures. I recall a moment during a break between sessions, lying on the floor near the leather boots of two men. There was silence. Nobody spoke. I tried to remain silent and humble, staying in Slave role. At one point, one of the men said, ‘Let’s talk like men! What do straight men talk about?’ This phrase intrigued me, sparking a discussion. I began asking questions and stepped out of the Slave role, assuming more of a reporter’s stance with a microphone, posing nonstop questions. At some point, I mentioned my thesis topic, and one of the men said, ‘Oh! In university, there’s this left-wing bias. You know, I am right-wing. I am a fan of Jordan Peterson. Have you heard of him?’ I replied that I had heard of him but that he belongs to the broader anti-gender movements and is not of my interest. I mentioned that I use Judith Butler for my thesis and began speaking about the performativity of gender and the anti-essentialist notion of gender construction. I am not sure what he understood, but he continued to contradict me. The other man remained silent but listened with interest to what I was saying. The discussion shifted to privilege and the predominantly whiteness of the leather and fetish community in Amsterdam. They did not fully grasp my points. However, the second man agreed when I mentioned that when we say ‘human, we often mean white, heterosexual males.’ The other man laughed ironically.

The cohort of gay men in the gay leather subculture is diverse, making it challenging to account for the political nuances within gay leather subcultures. For instance, another Leatherman writes in his Instagram profile bio, ‘Migrant. Queer. Left. Green. Fetishist. All the things the majority seems to hate so much. And more.’ This represents a completely different political perspective from that of the right-wing man. I must emphasize that my account of gay leather subcultures is partial and is situated within a liberal Western country where I lack the cultural background. I immersed myself in the leather community of Amsterdam as an immigrant exploring sexuality and pleasure. In my analysis, I did not delve into intersectional explorations such as the predominant whiteness or cisgender representation within the community.

Further examination of gay leather masculinities can investigate their positioning in relation to conceptualizations such as hegemonic, subordinated, or marginalized masculinities. Additionally, it would be pertinent to examine the extent to which contemporary liberal societies, such as Dutch society, with their diverse LGBTQ+ rights, facilitate non-normative gender and sexual expressions, such as Leatherman

performances. Research could also explore whether these performances contribute to equality among masculinities, femininities, and non-binary gender and sexual identities, or if they perpetuate entrenched patriarchal hetero-masculine norms within Western cultures and societies.

Gay leather subcultures are rife with dissonances and contradictions, just like the performance of masculinity within them. I attempted to approach these spectrums of discordance through a theoretical framework that expanded from queer theory to antisocial thesis in queer theory. I read Leatherman performance as involving subjects who are shaped by societal norms, without an inherent original gender or sexual identity to express. In this regard, I followed the perspective of queer theory that “the resistance against the dispositive of sexuality and the dislocation of gender norms dictated by the heterosexual matrix are potentially infinite processes” (Bernini 2020, 133). However, my immersion in the gay leather subculture and BDSM sexual practices leads me to perceive Leatherman performance through a sexual lens. I focused on the insights of antisocial theories, which posit that the “the sexual drive is an irruptive force, which always provokes a rupture of the social bond and the shattering of the subject in jouissance.” (ibid, 134). In this regard, I explored BDSM sexual practices not as transgressive of social normalcies but as transgressive of a supposed coherent and bounded self. BDSM sexual practices within gay leather performances that are often considered risky and extreme, underscore the porousness of the self and the fact that self-boundaries are not finite. This perspective introduces a posthuman dimension, inviting further exploration into the posthuman tonalities of sexual desire within gay leather and BDSM subcultures.

Consequently, this academic research journey within gay leather subcultures contributed to broader discussions about the performativity and constructedness of gender, sexuality, masculinity, and subjectivity through the shaping force of societal norms, such as shame. By centering my voice and experiences in these subcultural spaces, I suggest that these seemingly marginalized performances present insights that are valuable in their own right and for further research into the complexities of gender and sexuality.

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