BDSM in American Science Fiction and Fantasy Transcript

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In Conversation with: Jane Lehr (JL)
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Description: Transcript of the podcast of the discussion about the book, BDSM in American Science Fiction and Fantasy between author Lewis Call of history and Jane Lehr of ethnic studies, women's and gender studies and the liberal arts and engineering studies.

Karen Lauritsen (Moderator): [Background Music] Welcome to Conversations with Cal Poly Authors. This episode was recorded on October 18th 2013 at the Robert E. Kennedy Library at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. This conversation features Lewis Call and Jane Lehr discussing Lewis' book, BDSM in American Science Fiction and Fantasy which was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2013. Lewis is an Associate Professor in the History Department of Cal Poly. He is also the author of Postmodern Anarchism and numerous articles about Post-anarchism. He has written extensively about alternative narrative genres like science fiction and fantasy, alternative sexualities and the important intersections between these genres and these sexualities. He also holds the Mr. Pointy Award for Buffy Studies Scholarship. Jane Lehr is an Associate Professor in the Department of ethnic studies, women's and gender studies and liberal arts and engineering studies at Cal Poly. She is also the Equity and Access Programs Director for the Center for Excellence in Science and Mathematics Education. Their conversation centered around Lewis' main premise that BDSM, bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, sadism and masochism is an ethical way of living and building relationships. The two also explored popular culture in media including representations of BDSM in the Wonder Woman comics of the 1940s and the novels and short stories that Samuel Delany and James Tiptree wrote between the 1960s and 1980s and in the television shows of the 1990s and 2000s. Shows like, Buffy, Angel, Battlestar Galactica, and Dollhouse.

[Applause]

LC: Well, thank you Karen. And thanks to all of you for attending. And thanks of course most especially to Jane for being my conversation partner. So I'd like to start by just talking a little bit about the writing process and how on earth I came to write a book such as BDSM in American Science Fiction and Fantasy. But I won't talk very long because I want to leave time for all of the interesting questions that I know Jane is ready to ask me. And so I've got a few stories for you to help explain how I came to write this book. They're all really short, so don't worry. In one sense, I feel like I've been working on this book since I was about six years old. I've always loved science fiction and fantasy. I grew up reading science fiction, Isaac Asimov robot stories, and Robert Heinlein's juvenile novels. And of course, I love to watch it on TV as well. I was a huge fan of the old Stars Trek series, memorized every episode. You know, I got to the point where
the show would come on, I’ll be able to take a look at the color of the planet that the starship Enterprise is orbiting, and tell you what episode it was. Well, arguably that's a little bit too excessive. But the good news is I eventually found a way to turn that into a productive obsession. So, you know, I was able to translate my childhood love of science fiction into a professional opportunity when I started researching and writing about the history of science fiction once I became an academic. So I have this lifelong interest in the science fiction and fantasy as a genre and that really expands to every medium. I love short stories, I love novels and I love films, television, comic books. So I like to take a look at all of the different mediums in which science fiction and fantasy manifest themselves. So I should probably also say a little bit about my interest in BDSM. This is also something that has always fascinated me. Although, I think when I was much younger, I didn't really have the language to articulate that interest. But, you know, I remember picking up comic books when I was a kid. You know, I always superhero comics, I still do actually. I've got a huge closet full of them at home. My wife, Michelle, as you heard, drives her nuts because the place is just packed with comic books and I can never bear to get rid of them. You know, so I pick up a comic book and there would be some super villain like Dr. Doom and he'll be brandishing some kind of a web and—the single tail whip. I now have the vocabulary to talk about that. I didn't at the time. And so, you know, I’m—I just—I found this kind of image interesting. I couldn't have told you why it was interesting, right? I just knew that it was. And so, you know, over the years when I became a scholar, I decided this was something I wanted to research. So, for me, one of the really satisfying things about embarking on this research project is that it has actually given me the vocabulary that I can use to talk about this stuff. So I guess I could say a little bit about that. So the first thing when people see, when they take a look at this book, well the awesome cover photo. The second thing they see, that would be the acronym BDSM. So let me talk a little bit about what that means what it stands for. So it's an interesting acronym because it's very inclusive. It actually includes a variety of alternative sexual practices. So there are obviously four letters but those four letters actually refer to six terms. And those six terms are organized into three pairs. So it's convenient, it's a nice structured organized acronym. So the first pair is BD that stands for bondage and discipline. Bondage obviously is tying people up. Discipline refers to the physical control of our bodies. And people often find that those two things are closely related, right? So somebody might use bondage as a way to facilitate discipline. The middle pair of terms DS, that's stands for dominance and submission. So for me, dominance and submission is really about the exchange of power. So people who are into DS, they really fascinated with this idea that power is something that you can chose to give to someone else. It's something you could voluntarily give up to another person presumably somebody that you trust very much. You wouldn't want to do this to just anyone. So when we say that somebody is dominant, this indicates that they have an interest in taking power or gaining power over somebody. When we say that somebody is submissive, that means they have interest in giving away their power or turning that power over to a trusted individual. And then the final pair of terms that come at the end of the acronym, that's S and M which stands for sadism and masochism. So, we get these terms from a couple of notorious historical figures. Sadism of course comes from the Marquis de Sade that infamous 18th century French libertine. So sadism refers to an erotic desire to cause pain or psychological distress of some kind. Masochism takes its name from the Austrian writer Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. And I feel like I’ve accomplished something just by pronouncing
that. So he was 19th century writer who kind of developed the philosophy around what we now call masochism. So we now understand a masochist is somebody who likes to receive pain or distress or humiliation. And, you know, people sometimes say that the sadist and the masochist are the match made in heaven, right. If those two people can manage to find each other, then it's obviously the perfect match. So in recent years by which I mean say the last 10 to 20 years people have taken all those different practices and then combined them into this sort of inclusive acronym. I like that because, you know, that way people can think about how they wish to combine these practices, and often times there are people who are interested in BDSM will, you know, engage in various different combinations of those sex practices. So I think it's nice that the terminology we now have is as inclusive as a possible, we don't want to leave anybody out, and so that's all incorporated into terminology. So I wanted to say a little bit about how my first book led into this second book. As an author, and this is something we have always hope for, right, if you're working on one book, it would be really, really nice if that book would kind of lead into the next one. It doesn't always happen. But in this case, I was very fortunate that when I was working on my first book, it actually did give me the inspiration for this one. So my first book was actually about anarchism. It's a work of anarchist philosophy, anarchist political theory and it's called post-modern anarchism. In that book, I was really interested in exploring the question of power. So I wanted to take a look at some of the traditional forms of power including the political and economic forms. Those are the forms that anarchist have always been interested in. But because it wasn't just anarchism, it was post-modern anarchism. I wanted to expand the concept of power. I wanted to talk about some forms of power the people sometimes overlook. So in addition to talking about state power or the economic power of a capitalist society, I also wanted to take a look at linguistic power, the way that language has power over us in our society. I wanted to look at cultural power, for example how media institutions have tremendous authority over us. I wanted to look at psychological power, the way that certain types of psychological structures can also have power over us. So that was something that I was writing about a great link in my first book, and then when I started thinking about my next book I realized oh that can also about power, right? I can talk about some of the forms of sexual power or erotic power and in particular power exchange especially the time that people practice when their doing dominance and submission. So the conversion about power just basically kept on going from the first book right into the second one. The other thing that I took out of my first book was a strong interest in the notion of consent. Now this is something that anarchists talk about a lot. You know, I think people-- they have this mistaken idea about anarchists. They think that anarchists are opposed to all forms of social and political organization, turns out that's not actually true. But anarchists are interested in distinguishing between the different forms of organization. So from an anarchist point of view, political organization or social organization is perfectly acceptable as long as its consensual, meaning that everybody involved agrees to it. Well again, I found a real easy crossover from that discussion in my first book into my second book. It turns out that people who are interested in BDSM are also crucially concerned with that question of consent, right? That's really what informs BDSM as an alternative sexuality. So, you know, people who are involved in the BDSM lifestyle, they really emphasize that idea of consent that everybody involved has to consent actively to everything that's happening. They don't just want passive consent. They want everybody to negotiate and talk about what's happening and agree to it.
And that's important, you know, not just for the submissive person but also for the dominant as well, right, the person who is doing these things also needs to consent to them just as much as the submissive would need to. So I found the conversation about consent was also something that could crossover from one book to another. And then the third thing I took from my original book, my first one, was the interest in science fiction. Most of that first book was about, you know, kind of traditional philosophy, Herbert Mead, traditional philosophy Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard. But the last chapter was about science fiction, it was about the cyberpunk science fiction of William Gibson and Bruce Sterling. And that turned out to be the most popular chapter. Maybe that shouldn't have surprised me, but it kind of did. So it turns out, you know, people weren't really that into the philosophers but they were fascinated with those science fiction authors. Well I got the message, right, when people just only want to talk about that final chapter that was on science fiction. I said, "OK, I get the picture. My next book should be all about science fiction," right? That's obviously what people want. So that's what I decided to do after this book. One other thing I wanted to say about the writing process is that my first book Postmodern Anarchism was something that I basically wrote by myself in almost complete isolation. Like one of those medieval monks, sitting at his cell, you know, scrolling away. And that was OK but when I was working on this book, I found a much, much better way to do it. I joined a writing group here at Cal Poly. So I don't know if you guys know this but we have this excellent writing group where professors from a number of different departments come together, they share their work in progress with their colleagues, and it's such an awesome experience. So what we do is we'll just take turns and so each person will bring in a draft of an article or a conference paper, book chapter, whatever they're working on, will give that to the other members of the group, everybody reads it, and then we come together, often on a Friday morning kind of like this, we have our coffee, we have our bagels and we talk about this stuff. So I just found that to be a wonderful experience and my writing group really helped me to think about what I wanted to talk about in this book, to think about how it would make my arguments, clarify the arguments, it clarified the structure. So—several members of my writing group are here today, so maybe I'll just point them out. The group was originally called something like the Help, yeah [laughter] the original title which is why we changed it actually. It was originally called the Le petit guillotine, which I think is great because whenever we share our work in progress, the first thing that people do is start the guillotine, start chopping it up, right? Cut that thing to pieces and then you could put it back together. And it's going to be much stronger than it originally was. So, of course, my conversation partner, Jane, is a member of the guillotine. Also here is Devin Kuhn from Philosophy and the Women's and Gender Studies, Kate Murphy from the History Department, Christina Firpo, also from the History Department and Molly Loberg from History as well. And several of these people have come in even though they're on a sabbatical, so I'm especially touched by that. So thank you for joining us today. And I think that the readers of this book well certainly benefit from the wisdom that I received from my colleagues in
particular, I think, structure. The book now has a much, much better structure than it originally did. All of the chapters have very clear headings and subheadings. I think we owe a lot of that to, well, all members of the group. And I think Molly in particular was recommending that, so thank you for that one. And then the final thing I want to say before I turn over to Jane is that this turned out to be I think in many ways a book about ethics. I didn't really realize that it was going to be that when I first started writing it. But looking back on it now, I realized that I did something that may not be that unusual for writers. When I was a young man, I wrote about politics. And when I become a middle-aged person, I wrote a book about ethics. So, I think that's often how it goes. And then, that's what this book turned out to be and I'm pretty happy about that. So, I have a favorite sentence from this, you know? And people sometimes say, well, you know, is it possible to write a whole book that's really good or could you right a few good chapters. First of all, I would be happy if I had a few really good sentences, so I think I've got at least that. So my favorite sentence says, “I hold that BDSM is an ethical sexuality and deserves to be treated as such.” And I think if that's the only thing that I've actually accomplished with this book that would be worthwhile just getting that in print, getting that out there. So I wanted to participate in this ongoing debate about whether or not it would be possible to view BDSM as an ethical practice. So I made the argument in here that we can view it that way, that we should view it that way, and so I'm pretty happy just to have actually gotten that out there and gotten that in print. So, I think that's probably enough for me, so I'm going to turn it over to Jane.

JL: I was just going to say an honor it is actually be part of the writing group and process and also have the opportunity to talk with you today. And I have some question about BDSM and ethics but I have another question first. And it's actually related to what happened when we were reading a draft of your Battlestar Galactica chapter. I had not yet finished watching Battlestar Galactica [laughs]. When this chapter was in the writing group, I actually really struggled with whether I should read it and should participate and uphold my responsibilities. And so, my first question was, can we have the rest of our discussion today without spoilers. Like how do we do that? And it's actually—it's a pretty serious question—

LC: It is.

JL: —because I wanted to know about the audience and argument of your book. And so for potential readers, how familiar do they need to be with the vast array of science fiction and fantasy you discuss and how familiar do they need to be already with BDSM to come into the discussion, and how are you thinking about that?

LC: Yeah, that's really great question. And I think that is potentially a serious concern. I think a lot of the people who might be attracted to a book like this are likely to be science fiction and fantasy fans, right? And so, you know, they may have seen some of the shows that I'm talking about but they might not have seen all of them. And so, if there's a chapter about a show like Battlestar Galactica and they haven't had a chance to watch it, well, you know, they might worry about this, right? That if they read the chapter first and then go back in watch the show, you know, maybe I will have ruined it for them. So that did come up in one of our writing group
meetings. And so how I tried to deal with that was by taking out some of the very specific references, the plot points in *Battlestar Galactica*. You know, focusing more on some of the broader themes in the program. You know, so that people wouldn't have that feeling that, oh, if I read the chapter, then, you know, why would I bother to go and watch the show? So I hope that people would have the opposite response, which is they might read the chapter and kind of get a taste for what the show is about, and then get an interest in it. And then after that, go and watch the show, which you all should do because really, really awesome show. But yeah, I think that is potentially a risk with the work like this. So I have tried to minimize the spoilers in here. The other part of your question I think is also very valid, would somebody need to have a preexisting knowledge of BDSM or interest in BDSM in order to read this. I hope not. And I tried to address that mainly in the introductory chapter. So in the introduction, I give a brief overview of the history of BDSM. I talked about the terms as I just did. I try to make sure that everything is clearly defined. And I talked a little bit about the history of BDSM as sexuality or a set of erotic practices. I looked at some of the different groups that have—that practice this historically in the United States in the 20th century. I talked about gay leather, lesbian BDSM community, the straight BDSM community. And so, I tried to give my readers that context and that background. So that even if they’re, you know, not previously familiar with it, they would still be able to follow the discussion. And the other I included in the introduction, which I hope helps with this, is a brief history of science fiction and fantasy as a genre. What I talked about in there was the ways in which science fiction and fantasy have tried to portray various different alternative sexualities not only BDSM but gay and lesbian sexuality for example, polyamory, various other alternative sexual practices. And so I hope that that would paint kind of a big picture, so that then people would be able to say, OK, here’s how the genre of science fiction and fantasy tends to present these alternative sexual practices. And so then they’d be able to kind of plug in the discussion of BDSM into that. So that’s how I tried to approach it.

JL: OK. And another question I had actually about the book process or how you chose to go with the format. You talked in the introduction about this increasing visual term within science fiction and fantasy. And I was struck as I was rereading the Wonder Woman chapter this morning which is about a Wonder Woman comic primarily, which actually you probably should clarify for the group all the different versions of Wonder Woman. But I was struck that there are actually weren’t images of the comic in the book. And then as it moved to talking about like *Buffy* and *Angel* and *Battlestar Galactica*, of course, I wanted to have clips, right?

LC: I did too.

JL: As part of the book. And so, I was wondering if you could talk to us about how you came to this particular format and if you also see other modes of development and—

LC: Definitely, yeah. It is one thing that I regret about this book. I would've loved to include a stronger visual element in here. I would've loved to have illustrations, maybe some panels from the Wonder Woman comics. I think that would've been great. Maybe some screenshots from some of TV shows that I talked about, *Buffy, Angel, Dollhouse*, I'm especially fascinated with the words of Joss Whedon but also a *Battlestar Galactica*. And, you know, the reason that I didn’t
do that, it's strictly because of the intellectual property restrictions, that's the only reason. So I was negotiating with the publisher at Palgrave Macmillan brought this out. And so, you know, I was taking to them about whether or not we might be able to include some of that stuff. And it turns out that intellectual property restrictions are so severe you just can't do that, right? You would have to pay so much money in licensing fees to get these images that there's just no practical way to do it. And so, you know, I scaled back my ambitions. I had originally thought, oh, maybe we can include, you know, illustrations in each chapter or possibly a section of plates in the middle of the book, that would have been nice. I finally ramped that back and said, "Well, maybe at the very least, we can just get a nice image for the cover," right? So at least we'll have one nice picture. And this is actually a really good illustration of the problem that I'm talking about. So I went through several possibilities. I had a really nice screenshot from Joss Whedon's show, *Dollhouse*. It shows Eliza Dushku who plays the main character on that show and she is dressed from head to toe in leather fetish gear. I mean she looks like a dominatrix, so I thought, OK, that's perfect. I send it to my editor at Palgrave, Felicity Plester. I just love that name, a wonderful English name. She said, "Yeah, that's likely to shift a few copies." So, I thought this was terrific. So I contacted the Fox Corporation, they own the copyright on this. And they said, "Sure, you can use that, that'll be 5,000 bucks." And I said, "OK, well that's more than the book is ever going to make," right, so that's not really possible. And then I thought, "OK, maybe I'll get, you know, a nice panel from the Wonder Woman comics." So I wrote to DC Comics that owns Wonder Woman and said, "Could I possibly license one of those panels?" They said, "No." Not it'll cost a million dollars, just no. Just, we don't do that. We don't license this stuff under any circumstances. Just no, you can't have it. So, what I finally ended up doing is actually kind of fun, I just decided, OK, if I can't actually license a good image for the book cover, I'll just make my own. You know, this is Cal Poly. We practice learn by doing, right, so I'll just do it myself. So, you know, I have a friend who does some modeling, I've got another friend who's a photographer. So we got together and came up with something that—it looks a little bit Wonder Woman, you know, she got the rope down here kind of like Wonder Woman's lasso. So it's in the neighborhood but hopefully will not get me sued by DC Comics for something like this. So, you know, that's what we wound up with. I'm actually pretty happy with how the cover turned out and I didn't have to pay any licensing fees, so that worked out fine. But let me also say a little bit about the particular version of Wonder Woman that's included in here. I think that is important. So, Wonder Woman has a really interesting history. She was created by this really weird eccentric psychologist, a guy called William Moulton Marston. So he was trained at Harvard, had a very respectable Ivy League Degree. But he had some, shall we say, rather unorthodox ideas about psychology. And in particular, Marston was fascinated with the psychology of dominance and submission. So he wrote about this in his psychological works. He came out with a book in the 1920s called *Emotions of Normal People*. Which is just hilarious, right? I mean, nowadays people would look at that and say, well, "What on earth is normal," right, that concept is empty. It doesn't actually mean anything. But back then, you know, people thought, oh there is such a thing as normality and we can describe it and we can define it. But what's interesting to me is that Marston argued that what is normal for people is dominance and submission and he was especially interested in female dominance. He thought that that had real potential. He was actually a kind of eccentric feminist philosopher and he thought that if people actually pursued a female dominant sexuality, that this had a lot of
potential for improving the lives of women. He thought this could play into a kind of civic feminism. And so, he was arguing this in his psychological works. And then eventually, he started writing comic books and he created the Wonder Woman character and he put all of that stuff in there as well. So, this whole philosophy of dominance and submission and especially female dominance, it turns up on practically every page of those original Wonder Woman comics. Sadly, Wonder Woman didn't necessarily keep that. So I think that what you were getting Jane, if you look at some of the later versions of Wonder Woman, you know, some of that interesting psychological material isn't really there anymore. So, I think some of that does get lost in some of the later versions but that's why I'm happy to be a historian, you know, I can go back and look at those original golden age Wonder Woman comics and identify them as actually one of the first areas where American popular culture really started to deal in a serious way with dominance and submission. So that's why I included that Wonder Woman chapter.

JL: Yeah, and I was actually reviewing some Justice League history this morning as I was thinking about Wonder Woman, and I noticed that when she got involved with the Justice League, she got involved as the secretary.

LC: Yes.

JL: And that seemed like an interesting and important moment in terms of what happens to Wonder Woman.

LC: Yeah, absolutely. So, the creator of Wonder Woman, William Marston, died in the late 1940s and the character almost immediately went downhill. So if you look at how Wonder Woman is presented in the 1950s, in 1960s, it's a very conservative representation. So, she was the only woman who is part of the original Justice League. Later on, they added some additional—some additional women like Black Mary but at first it was just Wonder Woman. She was originally the secretary of that organization as you say. And, you know, there's a number of problems with this kind of representation. It looks like tokenism, right? It looks like they just feel like, oh, there should be a woman in there even if she doesn't really have that much to offer to the group. We'll just put a woman in there because we feel like we ought to. And so I think, yeah, they were really doing a pretty serious disservice to the character by treating her in that fashion. And, you know, I'm afraid some of the more recent representations are also problematic. So, you know, recently they've fired up this romance between Wonder Woman and Superman.

JL: Oh my goodness, I did not know that.

LC: Oh yeah, yeah. And this is controversial. A lot of the fans, you know, have trouble with this because there's always that risk that, you know, that Wonder Woman who started out as this very strong powerful woman character, a strong feminist, well she's going to wind up being Superman's girlfriend, right? And that's how people are going to think of her and that's how they're going to identify her. So I think there definitely is a strong risk there. But I will say that
some of the recent representations of Wonder Woman are a lot better than—Brian Azzarello has been doing some very good work on the Wonder Woman book recently. He draws very heavily on the Greek Mythology which actually is what Marston did with the original version too that's deeply rooted in the Greek Myths. So it gives the character this interesting gravitas, you know, it makes things seem a lot more serious when you kind of ground in that classical mythology. So, there are some good recent Wonder Woman comics but also some that are a little bit sketchy.

JL: And, I was noticing, particularly when I was reading your chapter about Marston and then also your chapter about Tiptree. That one of the conversations you were having was about bodies and also about biological determinism.

LC: Yes.

JL: And the reason, which bodies determine—or do they determine the types of gendered experiences and identities and sexual identities and practices we might have? And so, I also have some questions about this including is it possible to be kinky, which is one of the terms I don't think we've sort of explained.

LC: How do we portray that one?

JL: Is it possible to be a kinky essentialist or a kinky biological determinist? What was your interest in looking at these different authors and what did you mean by talking about them as essentialist or biologically determinist in the text and how does that matter for your readers?

LC: That's a really great question. So first of all, let me say a little bit about this word kinky. I think it's—

JL: All the guys were asking about that earlier.

LC: I just think it's great that I can get up here and say the word kinky in a public forum and, yeah, I really enjoy that. So, kinky is a word that people sometimes use to describe the practices that are collectively identified in the acronym BDSM. So, you know, when people are engaged in those practices, we might say they are doing things that are kinky. You can also turn this into a term that describes people who are interested in this stuff. You can call them kinksters. You can also call them perverts as well. So it's a case where people have taken a term that was previously used in the derogatory way and re-appropriated that and kind of taken ownership of that. You know, just as for example some people in the gay and lesbian community have re-appropriated the word queer in recent years. It's the same kind of thing. So, you can refer to people who are into this stuff as kinksters or as perverts and usually they're OK with either of those terms. So, this question about essentialism I think is a very, very interesting one. And, you know, the question about whether you could be kinky without kind of falling into a sort of problematic essentialism.
JL: Again, actually do you want to say how you are defining essentialism because I know like women's and gender studies and feminist theory use that term differently than analytic philosophers and so—

LC: Right, right. So, for me, when somebody talks about essentialism, they're referring to the idea that people supposedly have some basic fundamental essence. And it comes up very often in discussions about gender, right? So when we talk about gender essentialism to me that means the idea that there is some basic fundamental masculine essence and a basic fundamental feminine essence. And I, of course, am deeply skeptical about all such essentialist claims. So, my own work, of course, is very much informed by postmodern philosophy. Postmodernism in general tends to challenge or reject essentialist claims. I'm also very much influenced by some of the more recent developments in feminism, especially what people sometimes call, third-wave feminist theory. In third-wave feminism, again it's all about challenging that idea that there's any such thing as a male essence or a female essence. And I think it's actually a very liberating conversation to have, you know, when you say to people, and I do this to my classes too. I'll say to my students, you know, what makes us think that there is any identifiable male identity or female identity. And we talk about the notion that you can read gender as a kind of a performance rather than some kind of fixed essence. And Judith Butler has this wonderful book *Gender Trouble*, right, where she basically says, look gender is a performance, right? It's something that we do. It's not something built into us. It's not something that's natural. It's a performance that we put on every single day when we decide how we're going to dress, you know, what kind of mannerism we're going to use all that sort of stuff. As she talks about drag queens, which is probably the most obvious example of how gender is a performance, but then she extends it and says, well, it's not just the drag queens but we all do this. We all choose a particular gender performance every time we go out in public basically. So that's my take on gender. And you mentioned that James Tiptree. I think the chapter on James Tiptree is probably the place where these issues really come out the most clearly. So let me say just a little bit about Tiptree and why I think Tiptree is the perfect figure for challenging notions of gender essentialism. So James Tiptree Jr. wrote some of the most popular and influential science fiction short stories, especially in the 1970s. Tiptree was widely considered to be a real master of the short story form in particular. Tiptree also did a couple of novels as well but mainly the short story form. Well, Tiptree was always this kind of mysterious figure because nobody had ever met him, nobody never really knew who he was. They loved his stories but he never really showed up at the science fiction conventions. He never really made public appearances. And so, people wondered about this and there was a lot of speculation about Tiptree's real identity. People would write about this. Robert Silverberg as a famous science fiction author and critique, he wrote an introduction to a collection of Tiptree's stories in which he speculated and said, "Well, you know, people don't even know if Tiptree is really a man or Tiptree is a woman." And Silverberg said, "Well, it's obvious to me, based on the writing style Tiptree has to be a man. There's no question. Just as you could pick up book by Ernest Hemingway and you would know by approach style that a man wrote this. Obviously, Tiptree is a man." Well [laughs] spoiler warning, it turns out that Silverberg was disastrously mistaken. And the science fiction community eventually learned that James Tiptree Jr. was an alias and the person behind that alias was woman, Alice Sheldon. Really interesting person, she had done
some photo intelligence work for the US Army Air Force during World War II. She went on to do similar work for the newly created Central Intelligence Agency after the war. Got tired of that and went to get a PhD in experimental psychology. And then, she got tired of that too, and so started writing science fiction stories under this alias. And she actually used some of the knowledge she had gained in the CIA to create this entire fictional persona. It's not just a pen name, right? Tiptree had its own signature that looked different from Alice Sheldon's signature. Tiptree had its own separate bank account and a post office box and this whole identity. So for me, you know, that's just a great opportunity to speak about gender essentialism, right, and to recognize that well, you know, people for a long time thought of these stories as masculine stories. They thought of these stories as stories that were clearly obviously written by a man. And then when people find out, oh it's a woman behind this name, they actually went back and they changed their attitude toward the stories. You know, they reread them, they rethought them. They looked at them differently because they now knew that the author was a woman. So, you know, I think that really shows us actually some of the dangers of essentialism, you know, that people are assuming that oh, woman like one kind of story written by different kind of story. And I think, you know, almost the whole argument Tiptree's career was that that's nonsense. So that's why I wanted to include Tiptree.

JL: Fantastic. I have a lot of more questions on that but I want to ask you one more big question, and then I'll open it up to the audience, and then I have one concluding question.

LC: Great.

JL: That I hope we'll have time to go back to. But as you mentioned in your opening remarks, you argue throughout the book that BDSM provides an ethical way of living in a world full of power. And in particular you have a chapter on Joss Whedon's Buffy-verse, you argue. So Buffy does not offer an escapist fantasy of imaginary power relations. Instead, it provides a very real and meaningful account of the ways in which power must inevitably flow through erotic relationships. And so my question to you, one of the things you talk about in another chapter is the idea of being a switch, which I hope you can talk to the audience more about. But my question is do you believe that being a switch is the best way not for just some of us but for all of us to understand and organize our sexuality. Do you have a recommendation there based on what you've looked at?

LC: Excellent question. So it was really a need for me to hear you reading that passage. It's kind of fun to hear what this sounds like when somebody else is saying it. My work is very strongly informed by the philosophy of Michel Foucault, 20th century poststructuralist philosopher. And that's where I get a lot of my ideas about power. So Foucault argued that power is everywhere that the power exists in every single social relationship. And so one of the things that I was working on this book was taking that notion that power is inevitable that it's everywhere that you can't escape from it, and thinking about the implications of that. And so to me, that idea implies that we need to distinguish very carefully between the different forms of power, right? If power is everywhere, then I feel it's incumbent on us to take a look at the different ways in which power manifests, to try to distinguish the ethical forms from the unethical forms, and to
basically come up with a way of living in a world where you can't escape from power, right? Power is going to exist, and so you don't have the option of abolishing power or getting rid of it. But I think you do have the option of thinking about which forms of power you want to support and endorse, and which one do you want to criticize. So that's part what I was aiming for here. And, yeah, I think that the show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* does capture some of these issues pretty nicely because pretty much every relationship on that show can be read as a power relationship. And so then I'm looking at, you know, which ones seemed to be more consensual in nature, which ones seem to involved more negotiating among the participants, you know, so trying to make some of those ethical distinctions. I should say a little about the phenomenon of switching and the concept of the switch. So it's a little interesting piece of terminology that I picked up as I've been doing this research. So a switch is somebody who can take on multiple roles. So for example if somebody might be comfortable being either dominant or submissive, then we call that person a switch. Or if somebody is sometimes sadistic, sometimes masochistic, we call them a switch. So you can use it as a noun to talk about somebody who does take those multiple roles. You can also use as a verb. People talk about switching when they talk about the idea of oh maybe I might be in a different mood one day from another day or I might switch depending upon who my partner is, maybe I feel dominant with one person, submissive with a different person. So I do talk about switching pretty extensively in the book. And I think you're right just to suspect that there is an argument here or perhaps an endorsement of switching. So I want to be very careful here because I don't want to claim that it's for everybody. I don't want to claim that, you know, everybody should be a switch or ought to be a switch but I do feel that it's very valuable perspective. So, couple of things that I pointed out in the book. First of all, switching has become a lot more common recently. If you take a look at the history of BDSM across the 20th century, in the old days, people tended to have fixed roles especially if you look at the gay leather culture of the 1940s and 1950s. They'd said, "Oh, you either are dominant or you are submissive." No in between, there's no going back and forth. But then if you move forward towards the end of the 20th century, it becomes more and more common for people to be flexible in their orientation. They consider taking on multiple roles. So I was interested in that change and what that means. So I think it's a positive change and, you know, I feel that there's a lot of good things that can come from this. So, just a couple of things, first of all, I think it's very useful for people to have all those different perspectives, right? So that you don't just get locked into, you know, one single solitary world view. You can see what something might be like from the other side, from another point—person's point of view, so I think that can be very helpful. And I think it's also another good way to challenge essentialism actually. It gets back to our previous question. So if you think about the different roles people play as just possibilities, that you can pick up one on one day and a different one on another day, I think that helps us to avoid that danger of essentialism of getting locked into one particular mode of being. So I'm very sympathetic to the idea of switching and I think it does provide some useful challenges to the essentialist viewpoint.

JL: I want to ask one follow-up question and then I'll turn it over to you guys. But just that—to push you a little bit, because you argue that BDSM is basically an ethical way, right, to have sex. Amongst other things, to see the world, do you see other ethical ways to be in erotic
relationships currently that aren't BDSM sheet? And what are you looking for in those relationships if you are like ranking all of us [laughs], in terms of our—our levels, right.

LC: Yeah. So, you know, one of the goals that I had on this book was obviously to present BDSM as an ethical possibility. I certainly did not want to suggest that it's only ethical possibility but I did want to make the claim that it is an ethical way of living, an ethical way of building relationships, an ethical way of basically existing in the world with other human beings. So I do talk in here about some of the ways in which the real world BDSM community thinks about these issues. And again, it all comes back to that notion of consent. So kinksters as we sometimes call them, they have some ethical slogans that they use to talk about these issues or these concerns. Probably the most common, most popular one is safe, sane, and consensual. So that one obviously emphasizes safety, right, that people should be doing things that are not going to cause, you know, grievous bodily harm to one another. Sanity, that's the term that's a little bit problematic, right, because it's hard to define and also because for most of the 20th Century BDSM was actually classified as a mental illness, right? Professional psychologist and psychiatrists have traditionally viewed this as a pathology, and I'm pleased to see that, that is changing. So the American Psychological Association recently came out with a new version of their being diagnostic book, the DSM, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. So they are moving in what I regard is the right direction. So they're now saying that, oh, just because you have sadistic desires or masochistic desires, that by itself does not mean that you're mentally ill. It does not classify as a pathology. So, you know, I think that's a positive change. But it doesn't mean that when people talk about safe, sane and consensual, there's always those questions about how do you define sanity. So I think consensual was the part that's actually the least controversial and the most positive in that term. So that's the one people held onto. So, you know, consensual means that anytime— anyone who's involved in BDSM, everybody who's participating must actively consent. There's got to be negotiation. It's got to be informed consent. Everybody has to understand what they're agreeing to. People shouldn't be drunk or incapable of consenting, right? So they really focused on that question of consent. Recently people have developed another term, which is risk aware consensual kink, which preserves consent, right? So it takes that term from safety and consensual, it holds on to that but gets rid of the problematic language about sanity that was causing people some headache. So that one I think wants to emphasize that well everybody is knowledgeable about the risks that are involved, they're they were inform, they understand what they're agreeing to. And so as long as they're aware of the risk and they consent to it, then we see this as ethical. So I did want to talk about, you know, how people might view BDSM in ethical terms. But I'm not trying to tell people what is ethical and what is not or—let me rephrase that. I am trying to tell people what is ethical. I am trying to say that BDSM is ethical. But I don't want to say it's the only ethical sexuality. I don't want to impose this on people. I don't want to say it's for everybody. I think it's an interesting sexuality. I encourage people who have that interest to explore it and experiment with it. But it's definitely not the only ethical way of establishing interpersonal relationships. And, you know, there are some other alternative sexualities that I also talk about in here. Polyamory is a good example. So actually in William Marston, who created Wonder Woman, was polyamorous. He was married but he and his wife had a long term partner. So there were the three of them living together for many years. And actually Elizabeth Marston and Olive
Byrne, the third partner, they continued their relationship even after William Marston passed away. They were raising children together. He actually had kids by both of his partners. They raised the kids together, one big happy polyamorous family. So to me, that is also a perfectly viable form of alternative sexuality. Obviously, somewhat outside the mainstream, it's Nonmonogamous but, you know, I think it actually shares some things with BDSM. It's consensual, it's negotiated. You know, people like Marston who pursue this kind of polyamorous relationships, they recognize—it's more work, right? You have to make sure that everybody's needs are being met. You have to deal with the issues of jealousy that come up. But, you know, they negotiate. They work through it. So I feel like they're advocating some of the same kinds of open communication and negotiation that I also see in the BDSM lifestyle.

JL: So my last question for you and then I hope you'll be able to stick around and talk to more people et cetera because I'm sure there are lots other questions. But as I was reviewing your book this morning and as you know I was looking at PDFs [coughs] of the chapters—

LC: Sorry about that. Palgrave was supposed to send you a copy but they're asleep at this wedge.

JL: And I started to panic, because when I was reviewing it, my strategy was going to be to reread the introduction and then reread the conclusion. And as I [laughs] -- And so, I noticed that I didn't have it downloaded. I didn't remember that before. I went to your Google Drive. I was like, oh my goodness. I started looking at page numbers. I finally stopped panicking because I realized I didn't lose it—

LC: It wasn't there. It doesn't exist.

JL: And so, I wanted to know why don't you have a concluding chapter and what was your thinking there. And I thought that would be a nice way for us to conclude our discussion.

LC: Ooh, I like the same the symmetry of that. The conclusion of this can be about the conclusion or the lack of conclusion in the book. Well a couple of things. First of all, as I originally conceived it, this book was much longer than what is actually here. And so when I was negotiating with the publisher, one of the first things they said was, yeah, we like this but you need to make it shorter. So they like to do books that come in around 200 pages, which is where this one ended up. And apparently if you go much beyond that, there are some negative economies of scale, the books become much more expensive to produce. And then there are concerns that, you know, people won't buy them, it's already kind of pricey to start with. So I had to figure out how to cut it down. So it was a lot of other stuff that I would've like to talk about in here. I was originally going to do a chapter on Octavia Butler, this wonderful African American science fiction author, one of the very few African American women that who writes science fiction. I wasn't able to do that. And so there were a couple of the chapters that I had to leave out. Then conclusion was one thing that there just didn't turn out to be room for. So what I tried to do instead was to use the last substantive chapter of the book as a conclusion or something that might stand in place of a conclusion. So the last chapter is the shortest chapter
in the book. It's about Joss Whedon's show *Dollhouse*, which I thought actually might work pretty well as a way to wrap the whole thing up. It's pretty recent, right? So I was able to bring things right up to, you know, almost the present time talking about *Dollhouse*. And I felt like it's also something that would let me speak about sort of where we are now in the current state of things. So just very briefly, the show *Dollhouse* is about these people who sign up to have their memories erased. And then for a period of about five years, this fictional organization, The Dollhouse, will hire these people out for all kinds of secret missions. So they will basically program these people with temporary personalities that they will use for each of these missions, then they come back and that personality gets erased and then they start over again. The idea is after five years of this, you would wake up and you wouldn't remember anything that you had done. You would be wealthy because they’re going to pay all this money and then you can live happily ever after. Well, it turns out it doesn't exactly work that way. But I just thought this was a really interesting notion. And so, you know, the way I present this in the final chapter is basically as an allegory for a consensual full time DS relationship, right, where somebody would basically agree. OK, you know, for the next specified period of time I'm going to be your slave I agree to do that, right, I'm undertaking this in a voluntary way. And then, the other thing that I found interesting about the representation of this on *Dollhouse* is that generally the dolls as they sometimes call them, they're very well looked after, right? That the people who run the Dollhouse take it upon themselves to make sure that the dolls are well cared for, that they are taken care of and so on. So I saw this as maybe a way to represent that kind of, you know, fulltime BDSM lifestyle and also to talk a little bit about what BDSM might look like in a postmodern or a post-human world, right, where we have all these questions about identity, where we’re no longer in essentialism, right, where we don’t think there’s any such thing as a fix stable human identity. Well, this is a great way to represent that, right? We have people who, you know, literally get a new identity every day and they’re being reprogrammed constantly with these new identities. So I saw this as a way to say, well, you know, here is what this sexuality might look like maybe now or in the near-term future. And so kind of use that in place of a conclusion.

JL: Thank you so much. This has been a real pleasure.

LC: Thank you, everyone.

[Applause]

[Music]

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