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# Tracing Sexual Otherness in Sweden

The Opacity of Digital Kink

## ABSTRACT

Using Gayle Rubin's (1984) classic distinction between "good sex" and "bad sex" as a springboard, this article explores ideas of sexual normalcy and sexual otherness in a Swedish context through the lens of a multi-method case study of the kink platform *darkside.se* (established 2003). The article focuses on how sexual norms on and beyond *Darkside* have shifted through time, and in particular on how the platform takes shape in an ambivalent borderland between new forms of public kink visibility and lingering sexual stigma. Within histories of sexuality and feminism in Sweden, kink and BDSM have quite consistently been relegated to a domain of sexual illegitimacy (or bad sex). At the same time, waves of queer sexual politics, as well as a cultural mainstreaming of kink, simultaneously point in other directions. To understand (digital) formations of kink in Sweden, I thus develop a less binary conceptual framework, one which holds ambiguity and contradiction. To this end, and by building on discussions of "opacity" in queer and postcolonial theorizing, I discuss tactical uses of *Darkside* in terms of "kink opacity". Opacity provides a way of thinking through the tensions on the platform, between revealing and concealing, openness and secrecy, offering resistance to the idea of public visibility as that which legitimizes sexual otherness. Uses of *Darkside* here challenge the idea of normalizing sexual otherness by public exposure, and instead open up for new modes of obscure sexual expression.

**Keywords:** BDSM, *darkside.se*, digital sexual cultures, good sex and bad sex, kink, Swedish histories of sexuality, queer opacity

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**FOUNDED ALREADY IN** 2003, the Swedish digital kink community darkside.se provides, as the site states, “love and community in BDSM, kink, sex positivity, fetishism, expressions and lifestyles beyond the prison of normativity”. It is a platform for imagination and experimentation, sociality and self-discovery, flirtation and arousal, friendships and play dates. Darkside houses social and sexual networking, including members’ profile pages, lists of kinks, diaries, image galleries and libraries of written erotica, along with discussion groups and chats, event information and editorial material. Firmly set within an ethos of consent and mutual respect, Darkside embraces a wide range of sexual expressions:

You can be a sadomasochist librarian in-the-closet, a seeking leather master, a conveyor belt worker dreaming of a world in latex, a furry academic sporting bakelite glasses, a drag king with a new bondage affection, a queer puppy girl ... As long as you’re a friend of our culture, you’re warmly welcome.

With its approximately 200.000 members, Darkside is not only the largest Swedish kink community online, but one of the few sizeable, national online communities which has not only survived, but continued to thrive in the era of large U.S.-owned social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram.

Using Gayle Rubin’s (1984) classic distinction between “good sex” and “bad sex” as a springboard for discussing how sexuality is valued and regulated in specific contexts, this article explores ideas of sexual normalcy and “sexual otherness” (cf. Cruz 2016, 33) in contemporary Sweden through the lens of Darkside. The discussion focuses on how sexual norms on and beyond Darkside have shifted through time, and in particular on how uses of the platform take shape in an ambivalent borderland between new forms of public visibility for kink and lingering stigma.

Following a discussion of methods, I start out with a historical contextualization of how the dominant idea of Sweden as a sexually liberal nation relates to understandings of good sex as a particular feminist figuration. I then discuss the recent past of sexual social media, using the

platform as an example in a changing landscape of queer feminist sexual politics around the turn of the millennium. At the heart of the article is an analysis of digital sexual expression between modes of revealing and concealing, openness and secrecy. If dominant discourses of sexuality construes sexual liberation and legitimate, good sex within a framework of proud, public visibility, Darkside becomes a tool in the hands of the participants to navigate a contradictory sexual politics which embrace (some forms of) kink while also regulating and discriminating against kink identities and practices as incommensurate with ideas of good sex.

To understand (digital) kink in Sweden, I thus develop a conceptual framework which operates not only as a switch (between good and bad), but also holds ambiguity and contradiction. To this end, and by building on discussions of “opacity” in queer and postcolonial theorizing, I suggest the term “kink opacity”. As a way of rethinking the binary logics of the closet, opacity provides a metaphor and a way of thinking with and through the tension between the visible and the less than visible in sexual cultures, offering resistance to the idea of public visibility, identification and transparency as that which legitimizes sexual otherness.<sup>1</sup>

## **Methods**

This article builds on a multi-method case study of Darkside which consists of a platform analysis, fifteen in-depth interviews with users about their uses and experiences of the platform and one interview with David Jatko, the founder and webmaster since 2003.<sup>2</sup> Due to his public role, he appears with his real name in the text, whereas all other participants are assigned pseudonyms. While highlighting the interviews, the article interweaves the interview material with the analysis of the platform – as well as with research on Swedish histories of sexuality and feminism in relation to “good sex” – which combined provide a rich material for the discussion. This also means that the interviews are used strategically in so far as I select quotes from those passages that speak to the issues at hand.

The platform analysis is based on the “walkthrough method” (Light et al. 2018), which is a step-by-step approach to digital platforms to disentangle their cultural and politico-economic dimensions, such as

underlying visions, modes of governance and everyday forms of use. The method provides a critical framework for how platforms shape and constrain their users, while also opening up for user-centered approaches to how people may resist platform visions and ideas of ideal users and uses.

The interviews were conducted in Swedish on Zoom at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. They are semi-structured and lasted on average 1.5 hours. My own position in the field is that of an insider, but with an added distance of sorts as I am not currently part of a more public BDSM scene. This positionality and partial belonging helped create trust in the interview situation (cf. Rodríguez-Dorans 2018). The interviews were transcribed in full, then open coded, which generated a range of broader themes, such as articulations of “good sex”, sexual liberation and sexual norms. The direct quotes in this article are translated by me and have been chosen to illustrate broader arguments, patterns and tendencies, while also indicating some of the tensions in the material, especially between the platform’s vision and aesthetics and the participants’ experiences. All participants gave their informed consent to their voices being included in the analysis and had the possibility of adding to, modulating or deleting text in the interview transcripts.

Rather than finding participants by advertising directly on Darkside, I used snowball sampling as my recruitment method and an ethically gentle approach to facilitate trust. Even if the platform provides a safe space for kink practitioners, the users are also highly aware of the permeable boundaries of digital platforms and the risks such instability involves. I initially asked two people I am loosely acquainted with to suggest others to contact. I avoided interviewing people I know well, but did include these two acquaintances. The group of participants currently consists of eight queer women (two of them simultaneously identifying as non-binary), one pan-sexual woman, two gay men, one bisexual man and three straight men. All of the participants are white, most middle-class and most of them living in urban regions. They are born between 1967 and 1990, but a clear majority in the 1980s. The demographic makeup of this group is not representative of the platform at large – which has a majority of straight men – but is rather strategi-

cally composed to provide a queer perspective on questions of sexual norms on and beyond the platform. The composition of the group is also strategic in the sense that a majority of the participants have been members since the early years of Darkside, thus providing insight into the history of the platform and the shifting landscape of kink in Sweden.

In this text, I use the concept “sodomasochism” when it occurs in my sources and to refer to late nineteenth century definitions of deviant sexuality as psychopathology (Krafft-Ebing 1886; see also Freud 1905), a term which has remained surprisingly current. The composite acronym BDSM has increasingly replaced previous acronyms designating sodomasochism within communities of practitioners (such as SM, S/M and S&M), as a way of distancing themselves and the community from pathological discourses, and to demarcate a range of practices: bondage and discipline, dominance and submission and sadism and masochism. The participants in my study often use the terms BDSM and kink interchangeably, but kink is also understood as a broader umbrella term for sexual practices, fantasies and desires beyond vanilla (conventional sex), including the object-oriented dynamics of fetishism.

### **Swedish sin and good, feminist sex**

The idea of Sweden as a free-minded and sexually progressive nation has been an integral part of the narrative of the Swedish welfare state. Sex education developed as part of the 1930s sex reform movement, and in 1955 Sweden was the first country in the world to introduce compulsory public sex education in schools as part of a larger social democratic project (Lennerhed 1994, 34–36). In 1955, the article “Sin & Sweden” was published in *Time Magazine* and became a springboard for a mythologization of Swedish sexuality with wide-reaching international appeal. Together with successful cinematic exports such as Ingmar Bergman’s *Summer with Monika* (*Sommaren med Monika*, 1953) and Arne Mattsson’s *One Summer of Happiness* (*Hon dansade en sommar*, 1951), which shocked the American public with its portrayal of young, nude bodies and relaxed, premarital sex, this development helped shape an image of Sweden as a secular nation lacking in moral fiber (Paasonen 2017; Arnberg 2009).

And yet at closer look, this so-called Swedish sin may be everything but sinful, and rather saturated by ideas of good, healthy sex (Carlström 2019; Kulick 2005) in ways that push sexual minorities to social margins (Rydström & Tjeder 2009). While Swedish authorities have been conflicted about the myth of Swedish sin – as it contributes to a national self-image of radical progressiveness and exceptionalism – this sinfulness was also consciously juxtaposed in the 1960s by a promotion of “sexual democracy”, accentuating sex as modern, rational and above all, equal (Glover & Marklund 2009). Birgitta Linnér (1967, 1), a family counselor and sex educator, argues that “Sweden has made great strides in bringing about a gradual equality between the sexes in politics, education, employment and civil rights, as well as in social and sexual relations”. The Swedish model of good sex thus comes steeped in histories of social democracy and gender equality in ways that are difficult to reconcile with sexual practices based on power hierarchies, no matter how consensual (see Kulick 2005, 208).

In the early 1960s, a burgeoning “sex liberal” movement took shape in Sweden, making demands on, for example, the abolishment of censorship laws for pornography, the right to abortion on demand and greater acceptance of homosexuals and other sexual minorities. The sex liberals were mostly young men across the political spectrum of social democrats and liberals, primarily focusing on individual sexual freedom and the value of sexual pleasure (Lennerhed 2014).

Sex was certainly also a feminist issue at the time, particularly in debates on contraceptives and abortion. But it was not until the rise of the New Left in the late 1960s, which paved the way for the 1970s women’s movement, that feminists entered the sex debate, delivering an important critique of the lack of gender perspectives within sexual liberalism. Where the sex liberal movement had centered on sexual liberation (for men), radical feminism added a critical gender perspective, focusing on questions of sexual violence and abuse, in relation to which for example prostitution, pornography and by extension sadomasochism were understood as dangerous displays of male dominance and oppression. Sexual liberation of men came at the price of further degrading,

exploiting and dehumanizing women, these feminists argued (see Genete 1978). Integral to 1970s radical feminism in Sweden and elsewhere is the idea of heterosexuality as the root cause of patriarchal oppression, as something which builds on and institutionalizes structural dominance and submission, inequality and violent hierarchy. This particular way of interlinking gender equality and sex has a tenacious residue in ideas of good Swedish sex as a particular feminist figuration.

Sadomasochism read through a lens of violence also played a vital role in the 1970s and the 1980s “sex wars” in the US and the UK, as a prime example of harmful pornography for the anti-porn movement (see Dworkin 1981; MacKinnon 1989). The sex wars did not catch on in Sweden in the same sense, as radical feminism rather fed into an institutionalized form of state feminism (Kulick 2005), underpinning a woman-friendly society with progressive policies of gender equality (Liinason 2017). Swedish kink communities – and Darkside as a digital platform – thus took shape in a feminist landscape of sexual politics where gender equality reads as a mantra, defined as an absence of differences in power. As a consequence, everything perceived of as power differentiation and domination disrupts the gender equilibrium and translates as violence against women. Kink and BDSM are then understood in terms of gender-based violence by default, in relation to which a consensual submission to power and domination is incomprehensible. This normative understanding of a particular version of good, feminist sex conceals a wide range of practices, desires and identities. Then again, this concealment does not mean that such sexual norms stand unopposed, or that everyone is confined by them.

In her influential “Thinking Sex” written within the U.S. context in the early 1980s, Gayle Rubin (1984, 282) famously outlines a hierarchical system of sexual value in modern Western societies, a cultural need “to draw and maintain an imaginary line between good and bad sex”, between culturally sanctioned, healthy, heterosexual, reproductive sex, and that which society deems unnatural and sinful, including fetishism and sadomasochism, these “unmodulated horrors incapable of involving affection, love, free choice, kindness, or transcendence” (Rubin 1984,

282). Rubin is careful to point out that where the line between the goodness and badness of things is drawn may shift over time – and, one should add, between geopolitical contexts – so that sexual practices that were previously contested can be pulled closer into the warm embrace of legitimacy and acceptability, particularly in terms of legislation and official policy. But even if her model allows for nuance in this sense, it does operate with a binary logic, rooted in a similarly polarized political landscape.

In Sweden, as has been shown, non-marital heterosexual sex for pleasure has been embraced as legitimate and good for quite some time, as has monogamous homosexuality, following the legislation around registered partnerships and subsequently same-sex marriage. The space for BDSM practices has similarly shifted in terms of official policy: from pathologization to de-pathologization (in 2009), while also delineating, as I will show, a contradictory borderland of acceptance and stigma, visibility and invisibility, sex-positive queer understandings and radical feminist stances difficult to map out in a Rubinesque manner.

### **Queer sexual politics and the birth of Darkside**

Research on kink and BDSM has from the 1970s moved from being dominated by psychiatric and therapeutic approaches to sexual deviation as pathology and perversion, to research in fields such as sociology, anthropology, cultural studies and gender and sexuality studies invested in BDSM as culture, practice and identity (e.g., Bauer 2014; Beckmann 2009; Newmahr 2011; Rubin 2002; Weinberg 2006; Weiss 2011). BDSM in Sweden has primarily been researched by Charlotta Carlström (2016; 2017; 2018) in a rich, ethnographic study with a focus on meaning-making in BDSM communities. The cultural turn in studies of kink and BDSM has broadened the field of inquiry and added nuance to the discussion. But while the internet is seen as integral to the rapid expansion of the scene in recent years (Weiss 2011, 53), studies of the importance of digital sexual cultures for BDSM communities are still rare (McCabe 2015; Rambukkana 2007; Ruberg 2015; Tiidenberg and Paasonen 2019).



Founded in 2003, Darkside has an interesting temporal trajectory which spans all the way from an era of early online communities with a distinct underground feel, to a time of large social media platforms and a kinkification of mainstream culture. The platform thus significantly predates FetLife – a large, transnational social networking site for kinksters (established 2008). The participants in this study use FetLife when traveling to international kink events, but find Darkside superior in its search functions and usability. They also take comfort in the local situatedness of the platform as a form of safety based on cultural proximity and intelligibility (Sundén et al. 2022).

Darkside took shape soon after the turn of the millennium, in a political climate with some leeway for sexual otherness. The webmaster David understands Darkside as a child of a wave of sexual liberation:

When Darkside was founded, it was a counter reaction to the 1990s which came from broad political coalitions, both left and right. I'm thinking both anarchists and the [conservative] moderate youth league shared the same idea of sexual freedom.

With some echo from the sex liberal movement of the 1960s, the landscape of sexual politics was flexible enough as to, for example, pave the way for the 2009 legalization of same-sex marriage, a proposition which had broad support across the political spectrum. This was not the case in 1995, when the political left pushed through the registered partnership law.

Darkside was created at a time when “sodomasochism” was still bound by a diagnosis in the Swedish context, but following considerable lobbying work from activists and educators in the BDSM group at the Swedish Association for Sexuality and Education (RFSU), among others, the diagnosis was eventually lifted in 2009. Sara recollects how the discussions on Darkside leading up to the de-pathologization circled a lot around self-reflections and a balancing act between a position of distancing oneself from the idea of sexual perversion as an illness, and a position of acceptance or even embrace of perversion as some-

thing other than an illness, as something which merely varies in relation to the norm:

These discussions went: I am not sick. This is not perverse. Or maybe it is perverse, but that doesn't mean that it's connected to mental illness. I've thought about that, the fact that it actually happened. People have forgotten that there initially was this diagnostic code.

This was also a time when Swedish feminist sexual politics were partly rewritten in ways that had significance for kink cultures. The arrival of “queer” as political activism and an academic project in Sweden was spearheaded by a rather unique theoretical bond between queer theory and feminism (Laskar 1996; Wickman 2012), epitomized by Tiina Rosenberg's (2002) *Queerfeministisk agenda (Queerfeminist Agenda)*, offering “a way out of the separatism of radical feminism and the heterocentrism of more general feminism” (Rosenberg 2002, 20, my translation). Queer theory and activism, extended and expanded by a range of cultural queer events – such as club nights, burlesque performances and literary salons – opened up a space for sex positivity, difference and diversity in the landscape of Swedish feminist sexual politics. Wenche Mühleisen (2007, 177) speaks of this period as one containing an invigorated feminist sexual politics in Scandinavia. She discusses an upsurge of publications and media debates critical of hegemonic gender equality ideologies, making space for sexual freedom and pleasure instead, partly by embracing kink as a way of kinkifying feminist sexual politics.

In historical analyses of how queer theory and politics arrived in Sweden, the ways in which queer BDSM helped pave the way for a broader palette of both feminist politics and sexual expression is rarely discussed. Nonetheless, it is possible to trace a number of counter-cultural sexual spaces leading up to the turn of the millennium in the overlapping domains of kink and queer. While Darkside and the public BDSM scene at large today are dominated by straight-leaning pansexual participants, BDSM cultures build on the historical legacies of spaces more distinctively queer (cf. Rubin 1982). In Sweden, SLM Stockholm (Scandina-

vian Leather Men Stockholm) was founded in 1975, and 20 years later in 1995, Lash (later Wish) took shape as a separatist, women-only yet trans-inclusive BDSM and fetish club. Even though the radical feminist understanding of the category “woman” tends to build on a transphobic exclusion of trans women, Lash operated with a highly flexible understanding of gender, separatism and spatial belonging from the beginning. Such spaces and their queer ethos have been vital to how Darkside took shape and how these early days of the platform contained interesting openings in the intersection of feminism, queer and sexual otherness.

The participants remember the smaller community from these early years fondly, as it provided a vital breathing space and support on social margins. A majority of them are born in the 1980s, thus coming of age sexually when the user-friendly internet was young. They reminisce the mid to late 1990s and how they started to make their way online to primitive chat rooms devoted to sexual subcultures, or by searching for things like “kinky sex”, “bondage” or “spanking” on their parents’ desktop computers, but without knowing how to erase their search histories. For many, their recognition of themselves as kinksters, even if they initially lacked a language to describe what they felt, was simultaneous with a more general sexual awakening in ways that made sexuality and kink inseparable. Or as Cecilia puts it:

It’s been important for me to feel that I’m part of something bigger. Because when I was younger, I felt so alone and ashamed of this, so exposed. To then feel like there are others means the world to me.

They speak of Darkside as important during particularly intense periods of experimentation and self-discovery in providing a space for conversations that are difficult to have elsewhere and where kink is the norm.

### **Text-based partial visibility between revealing and concealing**

In the midst of an image-centric social media landscape, the participants in this study also take pleasure in the textual dimensions of Darkside as a way of navigating a more subtle and vulnerable register of semi-public-

ness and partial visibility. These textual aspects of digital sexuality have an interesting pre-history as early online communities have provided sexual minorities with spaces for support, community and belonging. Mailing lists, electronic bulletin boards, newsgroups, chatrooms and text-based virtual worlds housed lesbian bars and communities (Correll 1995; Wakeford 1996), gay male erotic spaces (Campbell 2004) and BDSM communities (Rambukkana 2007).

Significant for these almost exclusively text-based online communities were their focus on play and improvisation in spaces that simultaneously revealed and concealed their users. These communities held considerable potential for collaborative sexual imaginaries to take shape irrespective of physical bodies and locations, while also being constrained by the recurring question “Are you male or female?” (Kendall 1998), which anchored these digital spaces in specific gendered bodies and sexual politics, as well as highlighted concerns around anonymity and fear of deception (Sundén 2003). And yet, compared to the current social media logics of authenticity, of being and presenting as “one-self” (see Hogan 2012; van der Nagel & Frith 2015; van der Nagel 2017), these text-based communities had more obvious potentials for playful experimentation.

Darkside was never purely text-based and has with time become all the more image-driven. And yet, its roots in a textual internet era which privileges various forms of experimental and experiential writing is evident in everything from profile pages and diaries to libraries of short stories. Many participants are particularly invested in the diaries, their own and those of others, which depending on individual privacy settings can be more or less private, more or less open. Sara talks about how the diaries on Darkside are rare spaces of sexual expression beyond the grasp of the visual. She has had a number of serious relationships built on a deep-seated dynamic of mental dominance and submission, with few if any vanilla elements and speaks about the difficulty growing up of finding examples of such relationships beyond obvious visual stereotypes:

There is the cat woman stereotype, which was perhaps the first one I encountered as a teenager. And I thought, “What is this? Is this what I’m supposed to be like now?” When you are young, regardless of your sexuality, you take hold of these fairly visible sexual positions. And you think, “well, I’m supposed to be this now” and then things move on from there. Much of [my diary writing] has been about writing me out of that stereotype, perhaps also by writing about a kind of vulnerability that exists in dominance, especially when you are socialized as a woman.

The diaries here accommodate a form of “writing oneself out of stereotypes”, but also a form of writing from the margin on the platform, a space in which to, for example, narrate and form engagement around long-term BDSM-relationships that are difficult to visualize. BDSM-relationships that are less than visible and visual may not only make limited sense through the lens of mainstream culture, but also to the majority of Darkside members, considering how the platform is regulated by its own sexual norms and hierarchies in ways that prioritize striking images.

The site can be used in a number of ways – such as to find play dates and hookups, event information and friendships – but several of the participants also use it as a space for writing and reading the kind of texts that do not belong on other platforms, that are too long (for Facebook and Instagram), and too private to share elsewhere. Writing and reading on Darkside here becomes a counterweight to the regular displays of perfection in image-based social media, a social space for reflection, exchange and vulnerability. People open up around questions of mental health, or forms of sexual play that are particularly tricky to navigate, physically as well as mentally. This is not to suggest that images cannot harbor vulnerability. Indeed, pictures of bruises are emblematic on Darkside, as proud displays or visual evidence of play sessions that leave marks. But it is to draw attention to how the textual dimension in early digital sexual cultures has an interesting residue on the platform today.

Darkside has gone through a number of makeovers over the years, but its dark aesthetics speak most loudly to BDSM practitioners with

an affinity for bondage and discipline, as well as to fetishists drawn to leather and latex, rather than those driven by practices that are not as easily visualized (or would result in very different images). In comparison with such an immediately recognizable BDSM aesthetics, practices that build on challenging mental processes are harder to turn into images and may therefore move on the margins of otherwise marginalized sexualities. They come to occupy a textual undercurrent in an image-centric social media landscape, as well as perhaps a sexual undercurrent in the world of kink.

### **Degrees and tensions between openness and secrecy**

Darkside quite concretely takes shape in an ambivalent borderland between activist openness and more secret or hidden forms of kink expressions. The participants feel Darkside has shifted over time: from being a digital community based mainly on online connections and relations, to a space where people rather keep in touch with those they have already met. They use the site as a complement to, and as an extension of, physical events and encounters. This shift from the digital to the more obviously physical and locally grounded follows a more general development: from early online communities and their play with anonymity and pseudonymity, to the current mainstreaming of social media platforms and their norms around authenticity and ways of privileging digital connections with those you already know.

To present “as yourself”, and be open with who you are, also resonates with how Darkside is a space of openness in the name of sexual justice. While the users are free to decide where they feel comfortable on a sliding scale from proud outness to more cautious or secretive forms of online presence – by not showing or sharing a lot, or by limiting the reach of one’s posts to circles of close friends – the site builds on an activist outlook. The platform encourages users to be open, to for example show their faces in profile pages as a way of opening up a space of kink pride and freedom of sexual expression. The more personal information you provide, the better the functionality of the site (in terms of for example matching tools and recommendations). Members are even

incited to provide links on their profile pages to their other social media accounts. Then again, such openness comes with its own set of risks which several of the participants point to. Karin says that she is afraid that there will be a new kind of norm on Darkside around openness,

so that if you don't share things, if you can't stand up for your kinky side in your public life, that you somehow will be considered less worthy ... that anonymity will be looked down on. That would exclude so many people, and it would conceal how oppressive society can be in relation to our sexual expressions, how much damage it can do if news gets out.

Those who feel they cannot risk being outed avoid using their real names, or show their faces, to be able to show themselves in other ways. To for example conceal one's face in BDSM themed images can be revealing to a different degree, as obscuring one's identity in this sense can make room for other forms of embodied vulnerability and exposure.

More than ten years have passed since the diagnosis was lifted, but BDSM practices in Sweden are still far from destigmatized. Among the participants, a select few are out and proud BDSM activists and educators, but for most such public openness and outness is not an option, as being open is also a question of privilege differently distributed in terms of gender, sexuality, race, occupation and kink preferences. As Björn argues:

It may well be the case that it's a huge privilege to be able to be open. Not everyone has that privilege. It is also in and of itself a privilege to be able to play with power structures. As with everything else, if you can play with it, then you have a certain level of control.

BDSM as a form of risk-taking has been argued to presuppose gendered and racial privilege (Weiss 2011, 190–201), as well as class privilege (Carlström 2018, 1175–1177). The public image galleries on Darkside traffic heavily in visual markers of whiteness. Even though kink and BDSM scenes tend to be diverse in terms of body size, gender identi-

ties and sexual orientations, this popular visuality reinforces the idea of Swedishness as something which coincides with whiteness, and sexual progressiveness as that which distinguishes white, liberated Swedish men and women from a realm of supposedly sexually oppressed racial and religious others (Liinason 2017). To be able to put bodies at risk, and to resist or play with the norms of what is considered good sex, it helps to be safe in other ways. In other words, if BDSM disrupts the ideology of gender equality at the core of good, Swedish, feminist sex, other norms need to remain intact, such as those regulating hetero-normalcy, whiteness and middle-classness. To be “out there” with nothing much to lose (such as your job, your reputation, or your respectability) is quite easy, whereas deviating from sexual norms from multiple marginalized positions is considerably less safe.

To make matters more complex, it is not entirely clear what openness and secrecy means. Even for those participants who make no big secret of their BDSM interest, as Anna points out, openness is always a matter of degrees:

If you know my real name and have access to google, you can quite quickly figure out that I'm a BDSM practitioner. But that doesn't mean that you know who I play with, or my personal preferences. Those things that more concretely have to do with desire are perhaps more concealed.

As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) argues in *Epistemology of the Closet* (with regards to homosexuality), the closet is an impossibly contradictory place. She reads the closet as indicative of wider social and cultural mappings of secrecy and disclosure in ways that have clear resonance in the world of kink. It is not possible to fully reside in the closet, nor is it possible to fully leave it behind. While “in” the closet, you can never be certain of to what extent you have managed to keep your secret. On the other hand, if the secrecy of the closet is “of and about the love that is famous for daring not speak its name”, this is a secret that can never be completely and utterly exposed (Sedgwick 1990, 67). And more importantly, there is also uncertainty as to the type of knowledge that the



closet is supposed to hide. For what is it that is being revealed in acts of “coming out”, or in situations of more involuntary exposure? Is it the knowledge that someone has an interest in, say, being tied up? Or is it a form of knowledge that contains a more detailed account of desires and preferences (such as why, how hard, by whom and under what circumstances)?

The ambivalence around openness on Darkside has not decreased, but rather intensified as a mainstreaming of social media has coincided with a cultural mainstreaming of kink and BDSM more generally, most recently due to the widespread appeal of E.L. James’ (2011) *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy and its subsequent cinematic adaptations. Even though the participants find greater public visibility a positive change, they fear that something important to them will get lost in translation, as society tends to welcome that which comes the closest to already established ideas of sexiness and edginess. Or as Klara puts it in a discussion of what counts as good sex in Sweden today:

it should be a bit inventive and a bit exciting, and you can definitely do things that border on BDSM, but it can’t be too much, because then it suddenly becomes threatening and perverse.

In her analysis of the mainstreaming of kink (focusing on Steven Shainberg’s movie *Secretary* from 2002), Margot Weiss (2006, 105) similarly argues that an increased exposure of BDSM imagery allows the audience “to flirt with danger and excitement” in ways that reinforce the boundaries between privileged and pathological sexuality. Then again, I would also argue that the fact that some BDSM practices may travel across the line from bad sex to good sex does something to how the line is drawn and redrawn, making it less distinct in the process.

### **Digital kink opacity**

In this article, I have traced how BDSM and kink in a Swedish context, read through the lens of Darkside, has changed through time in ways that are not easily aligned with a binary understanding of good and bad

sex. The move from pathologization to de-pathologization marked an important shift in official policy with significance to BDSM practitioners in terms of their belonging to a community no longer marked by a diagnosis. At the same time, Swedish kink exists in an incongruous borderland of acceptance and stigma, openness and secrecy. The participants' locations on this map of sexual respectability are contingent on social privilege, but also on how particular sexual practices and desires relate to heteronormal ideas of edginess, as well as to risks of being outed.

While Darkside is construed as a safe space, granting a form of privacy or secrecy to its members, the participants are also acutely aware of the permeable boundaries of the platform. This porousness has to do with the ubiquitous risk of non-consensual image sharing, as well as how a cultural mainstreaming of BDSM is palpable in a community which has experienced an obvious influx of people who may lack the knowledge and the training a more gradual initiation provides. This means that new forms of public visibility of kink coexist with (or even lead to) a decrease in safety in the community itself in the sense that people become more guarded, which begs the question of who the community belongs to and who gets to be safe there. This also leads to investments in various tactical forms of sexual expression which simultaneously reveal and conceal the users. This dance between revealing and concealing is rooted in internet histories of text-based communities with particular residue on Darkside and becomes noticeable in how people invest in textual dimensions of self-expression. Such writing and reading becomes a way of flying under the radar in image-centric digital contexts, in which images are both more visible and more regulated.

Networked forms of sexual expression currently appear to be moving in two directions. On the one hand, intimate lives are increasingly made public through the use of social media platforms, shaping new digital sexual publics (Dobson et al. 2018). On the other hand, this very publicness of sex is policed and regulated through increasingly strict content policies. This is particularly harmful to those for whom sexuality has public dimensions in being linked to sexual cultures organized around

particular practices and identities (see Berlant & Warner 1998). Dominant discourses of sexuality tend to construe sexual liberation within a framework of proud, public visibility. But this focus on publicness and visibility as a universal model for progressive sexual politics conceals the importance of sexual expressions that are marginal, fleeting and less than public, or public by other means (e.g., Engebretsen & Schroeder 2015).

With reference to *Darkside*, it thus makes sense to speak of semi-public forms of partial visibility. Digital formations of kink on the platform traffic in degrees and ambiguities (between secrecy and openness, concealment and exposure) set within a context of contradiction and tension (a kinkification of mainstream culture paired with lingering stigma). To understand (digital) kink in Sweden in temporal and geopolitical terms, it thus seems necessary to address how particular kinds of sexual practices can occupy multiple positions on the map of sexual legitimacy and acceptance, both good and bad as it were (Howe and Cook 2019, 2–3).

In *Opacity and the Closet*, Nicholas De Villiers (2012, 6) deconstructs the fundamental binary which underlies the idea of the closet – between loud and proud outness and hidden, shameful secrecy – by advancing a practice he terms “queer opacity” as “an alternative queer strategy or tactic that is not linked to an interpretation of hidden depths, concealed meanings, or a neat opposition”. Queer opacity, here, is a set of tactics which by resisting public openness and visibility as that which legitimizes queer identities invent new forms of illegible sexual expression (see also Uibo 2021, 156–185). Opacity has also been used within postcolonial thought with reference to the work of Édouard Glissant (1997, 194), who insists that we need to “clamor for the right to opacity for everyone”. This right to opacity is a form of resistance to surveillance and imperial domination, a powerful alternative to a politics of visibility and identification which challenges Western epistemological desires to transform opaque subjects into transparent objects of knowledge.

In both queer and postcolonial theorizing, a politics of opacity holds a kind of unknowability or undecidability which exceeds categories of identifiable difference and transparent otherness. Opacity implies a lack

of clarity; something opaque may be both difficult to see clearly as well as to understand. Opacity also moves in a contradictory borderland of ambiguity and uncertainty, as well as alludes to a certain amount of darkness and dimness, as in clouding its subjects or objects in ways that diminish the light without completely blocking it. The multiple and tactical uses of Darkside among the participants speaks clearly to such veiled forms of sexual expression. Pictures are routinely cropped, angled or blurred in ways that make identification difficult. When a recognizable face is included, the circulation of the image may be more restricted, such as making it visible for friends only.

With reference to Darkside, it thus makes sense to speak of a sexual politics of opacity, a politics which is neither about concealed, closeted shame, nor an unequivocal desire for full transparency and public recognition. Darkside has little to do with shame, as this is a space where the participants get to make sense, where they become culturally intelligible, if yet still partly unintelligible to outsiders. No matter how marginal or obscure a kink might be, they are bound to find others on this platform who feel the same and who can validate them. But this relative absence of shame does not necessarily translate as a desire for full openness and outness. The participants are rather deeply invested in opaque, partly concealed, but nonetheless proud forms of kink expression beyond the bounds of identification.

Opacity could also provide a different angle from which to approach current feminist politics. The queer movement within and beyond the academy following the turn of the millennium opened up a space for sex positivity and diversity in the landscape of Swedish feminist sexual politics. But in the wake of #MeToo, there is a new politically conservative backlash coupled with a revitalized form of radical feminism (what some term a kind of sex wars 2.0, see Bracewell 2021; Cossman 2021) where discussions of the sexual pleasure and freedom of women and other others anew disappear from view (cf. Sundén & Paasonen 2020).

In Sweden, where radical feminism and its translations into gender equality forms a persisting sounding board for sexual politics and policies, this renewed focus on sexual violence following #MeToo has

brought new life to the debate in which particular histories of feminist sexual politics seem to run on repeat. Within a reinvigorated radical feminism, sex work, porn and BDSM are yet again sidelined by a gender equality ideology which focuses on the protection of women from sexual violence and abuse, a climate where a voluntary, consensual and pleasurable submission to power and dominance is (still) incomprehensible.

In this rather sex-negative climate, a sexual politics of opacity could, perhaps paradoxically, be useful in insisting on opacity as refusal of the very logic of comprehension. There is something utterly unknowable and indeed incomprehensible about how desire works, something which tends to become heightened in the realm of kink as non-practitioners may struggle to “understand”. By exceeding categories of identifiable difference, or of identification altogether, a sexual politics of opacity could help provide recognition without a demand to fully understand sexual otherness. By accepting the unintelligibility of desire, opacity here works to overcome the risk of reducing, normalizing and assimilating sexual otherness by comprehension, and instead open up for new modes of opaque and pleasurable sexual expressions and transgressions.

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## NOTES

1. See Sundén (2023) for a more in-depth theoretical elaboration on the sexual politics of obscurity and opacity in kink and BDSM.
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