

## **What can you dream for yourself? A Conversation about Kink**

### **Could you introduce yourself?**

My name is Jack Bruno. I use he/him pronouns, and I am an LCSW, an active therapist at a non-profit healthcare organization in Western Massachusetts that serves trans and gender diverse-communities, and a graduate of Simmons School of Social Work. I am an Indigiqueer, Two Spirit and Citizen Potawatomi person. I used to work at an FQHC in Boston, doing education and operations coordination work. Ever since then, sharing information has been a passion of mine. As a freelancer and faculty member with the Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board, I've been able to do that in a way that's closer to my heart—that's the capacity in which I'm here.

### **Thanks, Jack. Let's start with some terms—what are the intersections, overlaps, and differences between words like kink, BDSM, and alt-sex?**

That instinct that these terms overlap and don't have a clear delineation is spot on, because that's the way they're used in community. It's not really possible to create firm delineations. The intertwining is authentic to these spaces, but I can try to distinguish them a little bit. Alt-sex is a broad umbrella term often used in academic spaces or spaces where we're talking broadly about communities whose practices don't align with cis, heteronormative, procreative sexual practices. It isn't as common as a community term, but for some folks, it might be the term they choose to describe themselves. BDSM is an acronym that stands for a lot of things: bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, sadism/masochism -- some folks throw slavery and mastery in there as well, although that's falling out of favor for some community members. Again, these definitions are really loose and multiple. There's no hegemonic truth or hegemonic definition when approaching these terms. Popular examples of BDSM might be Shibari (being tied with rope using a specific set of techniques) or spanking or role play, things like that. People might engage with it in the real world or within their world of fantasy. Kink is often used interchangeably with BDSM and fetishes. Again, we're talking about marginalized sexual, erotic, sensual, charged activities, which people engage with to experience some heightened arousal state or a difference in their own headspace: sub space, dom space, for example. And people might access different facets of themselves through these experiences. So we can talk about kinky desires, kinky behaviors, kink as an identity, kink as a community. Often folks want a clean delineation between what's kinky and what's not, and to that I like to ask, "Is washing your dishes kinky?" Sure! It can be if you want it to be! Kink is a state of mind. I think that expansiveness is beautiful, and I also know it can be a little bit vertigo-inducing. I like to just encourage folks to step into the expansiveness.

### **I love that. And it leads to my next question: what might draw queer and trans folks toward kink? What does kink offer that conventional sexual relationships or dynamics may not?**

I love this question. I talked to a number of people about why there's a significant overlap, and also under-representation, of queer and trans people in kink communities. They offered many different answers. One is that decoupling sexual or sensual or erotic potential from genital-specific contact can open up possibilities for folks who experience dysphoria, allowing folks to have different erotic experiences that are hot and fun. Someone might have a lot of sexual dysphoria, but enjoy sensation play. Things like flogging or caning or impact

might give them a sense of being in their body or being connected to another person, allowing a different kind of embodiment.

There's also a sense of playfulness and disruption that's exciting for some queer and trans folks. There's space within kink for disruption that's playful but also questioning of power. In kink, we play with the intentionality and the artifice of power. Folks intentionally create and negotiate things like power exchange, wherein one person for the duration of a scene or in a relationship dynamic assumes more power, and another person is submitting, granting more of their power to their empowered partner. In other parts of life, people may not have control or the ability to consent to hierarchies of power, but in kink you have control regardless of where you end up in the slash. You can have very dominant bottoms, very submissive tops, and everything in between. That's the beautiful queer potential of kink. We get to interrogate the "innate" power, the "naturalized" power of cis heteronormative patriarchal couplings by fucking them, saying there's nothing natural or innate or inevitable about heterosexuality and missionary penetrative sex. So the space opened up in kink can be really exciting for queer and trans folks.

Some folks also discover themselves in kink spaces. There are narratives I don't want to feed into here that suggest being trans is a fetish. That isn't the point here. The point is that someone might play with femininity or masculinity, and realize, "Oh—something aligns here, something feels really good and important here." Then they might take that wisdom, which they discovered in a kinky space, and extrapolate it into the rest of their lives. That's just as valid as if they were trying on their mom's shoes or watching a Youtube "Get Ready with Me" or watching their dad shave. But there is stigma around connecting gender exploration and kink, because of the idea that finding an identity through a sexual, erotic space invalidates that identity. That just isn't true.

**In Adria, Cortina Tyson's "Decolonizing Kink," they write that kink is a way of critically engaging with colonial power, and that "kinkphobia is colonial." I'm curious whether you agree and how you think about kinky power dynamics as they relate to Indigenous experience.**

Yeah, there's so much there. Some of this, I think, is about reclaiming body sovereignty and pleasure as a gift. We have the ability to access pleasure and rest and fun and play for ourselves. That self-determination, that sovereignty, and that choice is itself threatening to colonialism and the sexual hegemony that seeks to determine which bodies get to seek pleasure and on whose bodies pleasure is sought and accessed? I think here about images of Indigenous women being positioned as conduits for white settler men to seed a new nation of settlers. This is a colonial sexual fantasy. There's also the image of the captive, of white women being kidnapped and held against their will by Indigenous communities—that's a kinky colonial fantasy. In these stories, and in romance novels, strong, noble Native people are often positioned as set pieces for eroticism - objectified. So the assertion of sexual and erotic sovereignty, the assertion that we have our own ways of playing and finding pleasure in our bodies, ways that aren't tied to the idea that we're dying out or to some noble savage past—that's powerful. And it's threatening. It's reclaiming subjectivity.

Last, I'll just say that we have always been in kinky spaces. I have this bead work right here on my desk from Judy Tallwing McCarthy, the first International Ms. Leather. Our people have always been part of these spaces. And we're not going anywhere. We're going to stay weird and stay kinky.

**Is there a potential for healing within fantasy for folks whose identities already exist beyond Western definition? I'm thinking here about Indigiqueer and Two Spirit people specifically.**

I think so. I do. I mean fantasy and dreaming and healing and ritual are all tied together. They're all about what it means to be in the body. They're about the painful alienation from self and from community, and about finding ways back to connection. I'll share that fire flogging has been part of the way I've connected with my body and myself as a Bodéwadmi person. Our role as a people is that we are the keepers of the sacred Fire. It's there in the name—bodwé.

After my grandmother passed, I sat at her services, feeling pretty alienated from the Christian funeral. I just kept thinking, "I'll see you in the flames." That felt powerful and comforting. I could connect with her in that way. Since then, having someone I trust who can bring that fire to me, who can connect my body and fire, has been such an important ritual. I found an Indigenous person who offered to do a fire flash—where you run fire quickly along your skin—in the shape of a heart on my chest. To me that that was healing, that was connection, that was a way of being in my body and in my grief. That to me is the healing potential of kink. And I should say, those weren't necessarily capital-P pleasurable moments. They were ritual moments. But there's healing potential in pleasure and rest and connection and community and all these other things that kink offers, too. Kink invites you to ask, "What can you dream for yourself? What can you bring to yourself in fantasy?" -- and I think that's really beautiful.