

Subspace: An Internal and Liminal Place

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Abstract • *Subspace: An Internal and Liminal Place* is a practice-based material exploration aiming to initiate an explanation and dissection of subspace — the dream-like state submissives (or subs) enter when engaging in kink dynamics and scenes. Handwoven and handmade textiles are used to create a textual language to express the embodied experience of queer submissive kinksters more genuinely, while also questioning the form and aesthetic of what fetish fashion can be. This engulfing garment seeks to de-stigmatize queer kink by sharing the affective impact that kink experiences, like subspace, have on kink practitioners. The garment also seeks to explore the use of talismanic symbols as a means of semiotics, creating a garment that can both outwardly signal to a community while also feeling genuine to the wearer.



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STUDIES
FASHION

INTRODUCTION: KINK STUDIES AN EXTENSION OF QUEER STUDIES

There are many misconceptions about queer identity and kink identity. For people who exist at the intersection of these two identities, there are even more misconceptions about who they are. As someone whose identity lives at this intersection, I can speak to not only having to come out to people as queer, but also as kinky. As much as the queer community is perceived to be open-minded, there is a significant amount of judgment in it from members within the community itself. So not only are queer folks with outlying identities, such as kink identities, receiving judgment from society as a whole, but also from within a community that should be their safe space.

My research aims to create a greater understanding of queer kink identities, to be a queer sex education tool, and to celebrate queer kink as an exploration of pleasure. At its core, my research explores queer kink identities and the queer erotic form.

I aim to de-stigmatize queer kink, and kink in general, by creating textile pieces that embody and speak to kink experiences. I hope that my research will provide a better understanding of what kink is, and the 'affect' it has on kink practitioners themselves, whether or not those engaging with my research partake in the kink community.

Kink dress is any garment, toy, or accessory that affirms BDSM practitioners, or kinksters, in their kink relations and dynamics. Some garment examples of kink dress are leather harnesses, collars, latex (masks and garments), corsets, lingerie, pleasers, high heels, 'stomper' boots, and even denim and sneakers. Examples of toys and accessories that qualify as kink dress are leather cuffs, paddles, crops, floggers, and leashes to name a few. As mentioned above these examples do have stereotypes and archetypes attached to them, both in and outside of the community. Stereotypes being the possibly harmful ways that kink dress has been used to uphold cisheteropatriarchal gender norms within dynamics. Whereas archetypes are the ways in which kink dress have empowered kinksters in their identities and dynamics.

My use of unconventional materiality such as natural fibres, loose fitted, shapeless garments seeks to challenge the stereotypes we see in kink dress. This approach will instead channel archetypal symbols to visualize a garment that embodies the internal experience of being a kinkster. Subspace is one of these internal experiences that is integral to many submissives yet does not seem to be reflected in the current zeitgeist of kink dress. Applying this atypical aesthetic to kink dress through the lens of affect, embodiment and semiotics will offer a grounding framework for this practice-based, textural exploration into the liminality of subspace.

SUBSPACE: THE LIMINAL PLACE INSIDE ME

Subspace feels like something bursting from the inside out. It's always there, lying dormant, just below the surface of the consciousness I live in. It is a part of me, a place within me, a space so tangible yet abstract just like the place within us that houses our thoughts and imagination.

Subspace is the softness within me, the trusting part of me, the surrendering side of me, the lust within me, the hope, the want and desire, the good I see in myself and others.

There is no anger in subspace, only light and love and connection to my highest self. Yet the ways in which subspace is pulled to the surface by myself or another may look intense, angry, cold, rough, demeaning, tough, sad — a wind whirl of impact and a rainfall of tears... those are the release of worldly fears, shame, disappointment, and distrust that one must walk through to experience the release, the fullness of subspace.

Once I'm there, once I've entered this side of myself — this space within me that houses my deepest desire — I am home... I am safe... I am loved... I am worthy of all that is meant for me. Pain ceases just as the physical world around me does too. It is only this liminal space inside me in which I inhabit that engulfs me like high tide engulfs the shore.

Oh, and if you're lucky enough to be there with me, if you are lucky enough to be the Dom(me) assisting in my assent, you are blessed with the most earth-shattering show of genuine connection. If I trust you enough to see into the intimate corners of this space within me, you have seen the most vulnerable yet powerful side of me.

Do not wake me, I do not wish to come back to you... at least, not yet. Let me enjoy this release from the intensity of our shared experience, let me revel and shine for you, let me share this place inside me with you.

Drink in my bliss. It is a gift from me, for me...but also for you too. Drink in the fruits of your labour. Sit back and watch closely the pleasure we've created from the space inside me... because it won't be long before I come crashing back down to this harsh reality.

THE TALISMAN VEST: AN EMBODIED GARMENT

Subspace can be experienced through all the senses. A submissive (sub) engages in a scene with all their senses either being stimulated or deprived by their Dom(me). This interaction can guide the sub into subspace, although this should not be the focus or final goal of a scene. Having personally experienced subspace, I have always been asking myself, “What is subspace?” However, I have had the sudden realization that I should instead be asking, “Where is subspace? Where do I go when I am in subspace? What part of my body and mind am I residing in?” I feel the most attuned to my body when I am in subspace. It is a place that exists within me all the time, yet is somehow also ephemeral and ever shifting, moving in and out of my subconscious. It awakens and bubbles up into my consciousness, becoming physically present when I am engaging in a scene and BDSM play.

“Subspace refers to the trancelike state some submissives experience during BDSM play” (Smith, 2021).

The goal of creating this wearable textile exploration is to examine how kink intersects with queer identity through investigating how experiencing subspace and participating in kink scenes affirms these identities.

As Wolfaardt explains, “Everyone seems to have a slightly different take on what subspace is, and how it makes them feel, but the common thread seems to be zoning out into a different ‘headspace’ and having a powerful (and spiritual in some ways) meditative experience” (Wolfaardt, 2014). It is undeniable that there is a sense of “magic” in BDSM spaces, interactions, and the intersection of queer and kink identities. For queer kinksters, experiencing subspace serves as both a catalyst and representation of these intersections.

When I enter subspace during a scene, it is a reverential and spiritual experience because it is a result of being in alignment with my truest self. To express this, I decided that a part of my garment design would be to adorn the textiles with talismans and charms. The textile-based talismans were crafted through material explorations, including combining scrap fabrics as well as embroidering poems and significant BDSM words into the fabric (Figure 1). Throughout the process, I experimented with printing pencil-drawn BDSM imagery as talismanic symbols. These images depicted important objects to my queer kink experiences and were printed onto family heirloom linen fabric using a Ricoh Large Format Flatbed Printer, which would eventually become the hood of the talisman vest (Figure 2).

In *The Talisman or the Word as an Object and as an Image-Signifier*, Dureau investigates the power of talismans and what endows an object with talismanic properties:

The talisman, as we shall define it, is an object or a parchment bearing a text or an image meant to either protect the bearer, or endow him with precise powers... The word 'talisman' designates both the object used as a sign (of protection of power), or the sign, or the sum of signs represented on that object. As such, the talisman is a semiotic object of study. (Dureau, 2002)



Figure 1 Material Exploration, Textile Talismans, 2022, Deanna Armenti.

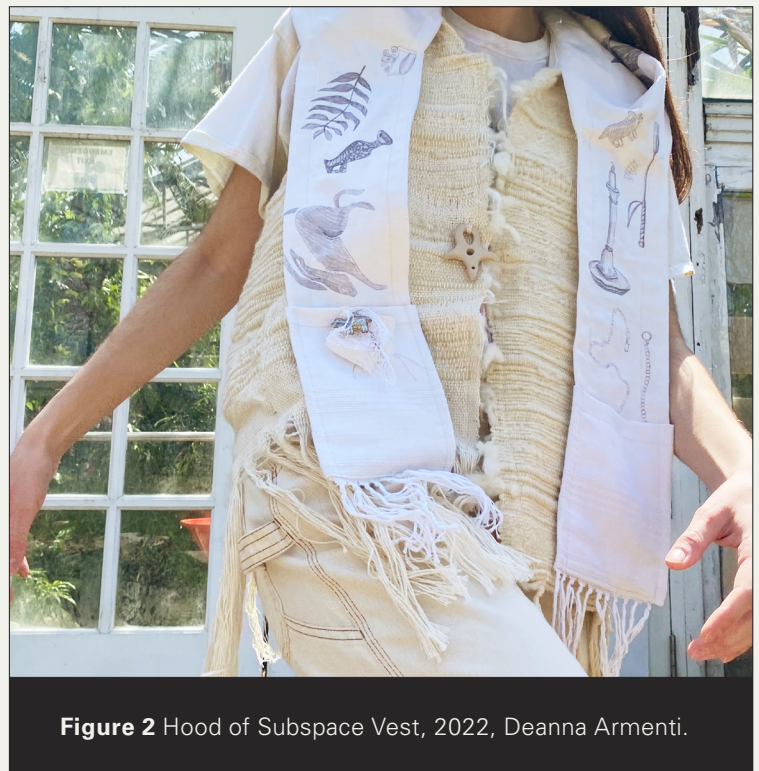


Figure 2 Hood of Subspace Vest, 2022, Deanna Armenti.

Semiotics, as it relates to dress, has had influence in both the queer and kink communities through the power of signalling. In the queer community, using fashion items and objects as a means of signalling has been a way of safely connecting while navigating public spaces, an example of this being the hanky code. Throughout the process of creating these talisman explorations, I found that the textile talismans are visually bolder yet subtler in their signalling. Conversely, the drawn talismanic symbols printed onto the fabric are visually subtler while the signalling is bolder.

This juxtaposition serves as an interesting visual tension in the semiotics of signalling fetish, as well as queerness, in dress. There are many different types of talismans — power, protection, love, safety, and so forth. The use of talismans in my garment design plays off of this to communicate the power dynamics in BDSM. When choosing which kink related objects to draw, I turned to Sarah Ahmed's research. Ahmed discusses how it is not the objects themselves that create emotions, but rather the environment, circumstances, and memories that the objects remind us of that infuses value into the objects we collect and make (Ahmed, 2010). This concept deeply resonates with all the objects, toys, tools, and dress that is integral to BDSM, a strong example of this being collars. Collars hold the significance of the Dom/sub (D/s) dynamic, shared experiences, and encounters within it. Therefore, when a kink dynamic ends, most kinksters will retire or discard the collar from that dynamic, as it is too significant to that specific relationship for the sub or the Dom(me) to bring into a new dynamic.



Figure 3 Close up, Subspace Vest, 2022, Deanna Armenti.

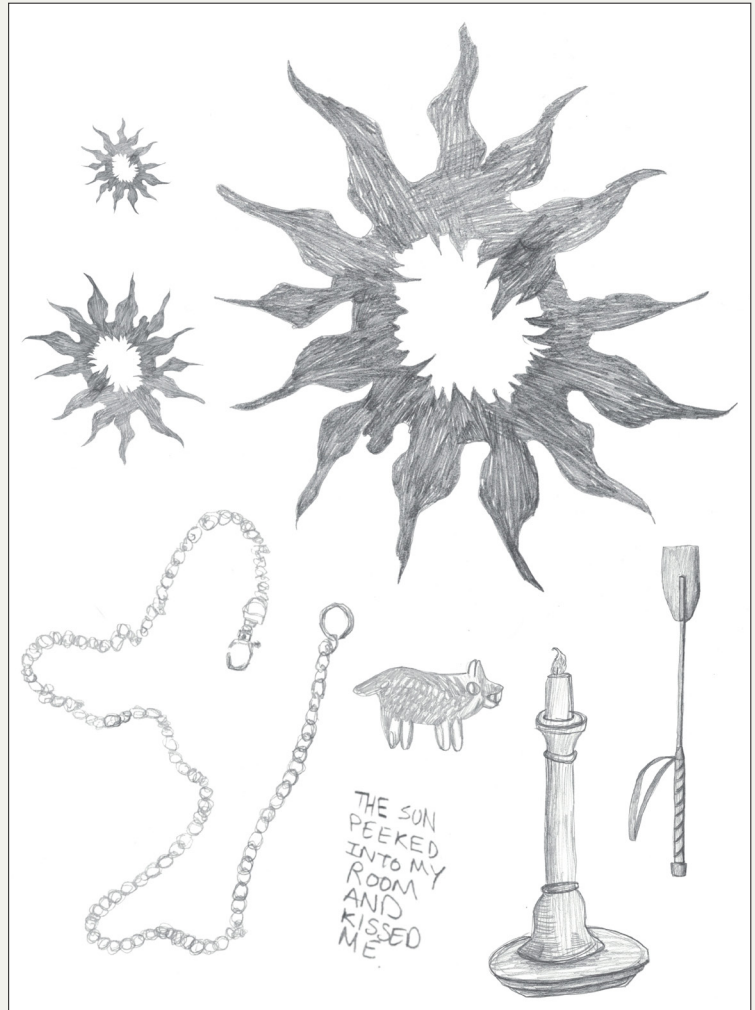


Figure 4 Talisman Drawings, 2022, Deanna Armenti.

Ahmed proposes that objects derive value from the experiences and environments they have been associated with. Impact toys, collars, harnesses, and rope — all can be considered as a type of “talisman” within the practice of kink. It is not the items themselves that give meaning to the scene or the interaction and exchange of energy between the people partaking in it, but rather the significance, emotions, and dynamics that these items are used to express. They are tools of expression, just as talismans are objects of expression. Bearing this perspective in mind, I chose objects like a chain leash, a crop, candle, and wolf when deciding what to draw as talismanic symbols to be printed onto the hood of the vest (Figure 4) as these symbols have meaning to my specific D/s dynamic. All of the design choices for the talisman vest— utilizing talismans as a means of signalling, weaving my own textiles for the body of the vest (Figure 5), designing images to print onto the hood, and using a natural, tone-on-tone colour scheme to emphasize texture — not only empowers me as the wearer, but all culminate to create a garment that more closely embodies my internal experience of subspace.

A lot of fetish fashion emphasizes the body in ways that are pleasing to both the eye and the wearer through form-fitting clothing. This is especially present when it comes to self-expression at public kink events.

While this is a very important part of kink, the talisman vest aims to make space within the world of fetish fashion for garments that offer different aesthetic options for subs.

Though a sub might not wear this design during a scene, as it is not very practical for the activities involved, my hope is that this garment could be used to sooth a sub during aftercare or be worn in daily life as a way to feel connected to their kink identity. As Entwistle states, “subcultural theory (is) the symbolic work performed by members of subcultures, who, it is argued, deploy cultural artifacts such as dress to mark out the boundaries of their group and register their belonging” (Entwistle, 2015). At its very essence, this vest should feel like “loungewear” for subs, offering an additional type of garment for expressing their identity while serving as an alternative to the tight latex and leather garments worn at public fetish events like munches or rope jams. The talisman vest is an “anti-aesthetic” to these traditional forms of fetish fashion. It aims to embody the internal experience of a D/s dynamic and push against kink, especially queer kink, that is palpable for the masses. Geczy and Karaminas state that queer fetish fashion should be inherently unpalatable to the hetero majority as it “...ritualizes modern gays and lesbians into a transgressive transaction that is about ecstasy and ruin” (Geczy and Karaminas, 2013). Queer and kink identities are entangled because kink subverts the act of sex to the point that it no longer resembles traditional heterosexual gender roles and sexual encounters, an aspect that many queer folks find profound liberation in.

My design ethos remains rooted in the abject nature of kink, but also extends the boundaries of what fetish fashion is and can be. This extension challenges what “sexy” is and can be by furthering the aesthetic of fetish fashion to more closely align and embody the internal experience of queer kink identities. In Schroeder’s article, Liz Collins describes kink as a part of her identity as a queer woman and designer. She states,

BDSM and fetish are part of my aesthetic language and very connected to who I am as an artist and as a person. BDSM and fetish symbols show up as motifs in my clothing both as fashion and ideas about how the body can be restrained and experience different sensations. I translate that into a visual language... (Schroeder, 2007)

Similarly to Collins', I use fashion and textiles to express my entangled queer and kink identities. Infusing both facets of my identity in practical, visual, and physical ways into my artistic practice and research helps me express my own intersecting queer and kink identities. This approach aims to break down the stigmatized stereotypes that society associates with these identities. Utilizing my kink and queer identity to form a visual language through my selection of colour palettes, materials, and techniques allows me to create garments that communicate my perspective. This process also allows me to be in dialogue and critique the world around me as my identity is inherent to my creating, making, and designing.

METHODOLOGY

The creation of the talisman vest utilized practice-based methodology through material exploration. I engaged with weaving, sculpting, embroidery, and sewing as bricolage technique to create a textile montage. The qualitative research practice of montage embodies temporality as it "... stitches, edits, and puts slices of reality together" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017). Subspace is a temporal place that is ever present within a sub but not always being accessed and engaged with. The textural montage used to create the talisman vest stitches together multiple soft textile techniques with the hard textures of the sculpted clay talismans, bringing two realities together—the ethereal temporality of subspace and solid corporal reality.

Auto-ethnography is a narrative based inquiry methodology that turns the lens of query back onto the researcher (Chase, 2017).

Subspace has been explored auto-ethnographically, and then physically embodied as the talisman vest, through the lens of my own lived experiences in D/s dynamics and the kink community.

It is important to note that every sub experiences subspace in different ways. While this garment is an embodiment of my interpretation of subspace, it is not meant to be an all-encompassing expression of subspace. Thus, crystallization is used as a multi-faceted methodology (Ellingson, 2009) bringing together practice-based and arts-based research, creative writing, and theoretical analysis. This brings into focus the ephemeral experience of subspace that cannot only be expressed through theorizing or one way of knowing. The use of crystallization builds on the auto-ethnographic approach of this project, ensuring there are multiple vantage points to contextualize my experience.

CONCLUSION

This project constituted a textile exploration of subspace, an embodiment of this liminal, internal space I move in and out of during kink scenes. The use of many different textile techniques created a “textural language of expression” to communicate the experience of subspace and my personal connection to it. Weaving together different textural expressions through the use of various raw materials, such as wool batting, pony hair, and mohair, felt lyrically temporal. Weaving embodied the textural language of bricolage, visually expressing the montage of realities a sub feels during subspace.

The talisman vest is a garment that engulfs me and expresses the all-encompassing feeling of subspace. The use of talismans expresses the power and protection found in D/s dynamics. A visual tension is created from collaging the textile-based talismans sewn onto the vest and the drawn talismanic symbols printed onto the hood of the vest. By printing these object talismans onto family heirloom fabric, I merged the past with the present, the old with the new, which inherently gives power and a talisman-like quality to the talisman vest itself.

While I was creating my talisman material explorations, I was viewing each talisman I created as separate from one another, as well as separate from the overall garment design.

In actuality, the entire garment itself — with all of the fabric talismans I created, the textiles I wove, and the drawn talisman symbols I printed onto family heirloom fabric — comes together to create one large wearable talisman that embodies the liminal, transitory nature of subspace.



Figure 5 Handwoven Textiles, 2022, Deanna Armenti.



Figure 6 Draping Process, Hood Mock-Up, 2022, Deanna Armenti.



Figure 7 Final Subspace Vest, Front, 2022, Deanna Armenti.



Figure 8 Final Subspace Vest, Back, 2022, Deanna Armenti.



Figure 9 Final Subspace Vest, Front, Three Quarter Angle, 2022, Deanna Armenti.



Figure 10 Final Subspace Vest, Front, Three Quarter Angle, 2022, Deanna Armenti.



Figure 11 Final Subspace Vest, Hood Close Up, 2022, Deanna Armenti.



Figure 12 Final Subspace Vest, Back Close Up, 2022, Deanna Armenti.

Glossary

submissive: Also shortened to sub and usually spelled with a lowercase 's'. The person in a BDSM scene who is consensually giving away their power, but not their control, to their partner. Even though subs don't have power in a BDSM dynamic, they always retain their control in a scene. Through the use of safewords, they can slow down or end the scene completely.

Dom(me): A dominant, traditionally Dom is the masculine spelling and Domme is the feminine spelling, is a person who has the power in a BSDM scene. Dom(me)s can also use safewords to slow down or end scenes.

Subspace: Explained in the kink community as a meditative, dream-like state similar to the feeling of floating in water. Every subs experience of subspace is different which is why concrete definitions of subspace have not materialized.

Fetish: Any type of play, toy, or object that turns on a kinkster.

Kinkster: A slang term for someone who practices kink, engaging in kink dynamics and scenes.

Safewords: "In kink or BDSM, a safeword is an agreed-upon word, phrase, or physical motion that is used to stop, slow, or continue a scene. Usually, the 'stoplight' system is used — Red for stop immediately, Yellow for slow down, Green for continue as is" (KM).

Scene: "A BDSM/kink interaction with a defined start and stop point. All involved partners discuss how the scene is going to go and any kind of limits or boundaries that they have, as well as safe words before the scene begins" ("What is a Scene").

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Author Bio

Deanna Armenti (she/fae) is a Queer Genderfae poet, zine creator, and textile researcher. While *Subspace: An Internal and Liminal Space* was written during Deanna's Fashion Master's Degree at Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU), Deanna is now continuing at TMU in the Media and Design Innovation doctorate program and is a recipient of the Ontario Graduate Scholarship. Her PhD research is practice-based and builds on her MA thesis project, *Ripple: A Wearable Environment*, which further explored subspace as a meditative, dream-like state similar to the feeling of floating in water. Her research investigates queer kink identities through the lens of embodiment and affect to "queery" the queer erotic form. Deanna seeks to combat the pathologization and stigmatization of the queer kink community through demystifying this lifestyle. Her creation of accessible material installations is an embodied practice which invites folks to engage with the community. Deanna's research focuses on queer temporalities, seeking liminal spaces, and "slices in time" as a means of conveying the non-linear spectrum of queerness. She also explores the community's use of signalling as semiotics, investigating alternate forms of communication such as sign based discourse.

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