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HANKY PANKY: THE HISTORY AND CULTURAL IMPACT OF THE HANKY CODE

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**HANKY PANKY: THE HISTORY AND CULTURAL IMPACT OF THE
HANKY CODE**

BY

J. RAÚL CORNIER

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE

REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF SCIENCE

IN

TEXTILES, FASHION MERCHANDISING, AND DESIGN

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OF
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ABSTRACT

For centuries, homosexual men and women incorporated ways of covertly communicating sexual orientation and/or sexual identity into behavior, language, and dress. In the twentieth century, a series of embedded sartorial codes used by queer men communicated sexual orientation and availability. As fashion and representations of masculinity changed, so did the use of various clothing items to represent distinct sartorial codes for communicating same-sex desire.

One such sartorial code, known as the hanky code, was used by queer men in the 1970s and continued into the 1980s. The hanky code consisted of the placement of a colored bandana in one's rear pocket. The color was associated with a particular sexual practice or fetish, and placement was associated with the particular sexual role the wearer engaged in. This was the first queer sartorial code to simultaneously communicate sexual orientation or identity, sexual availability, and sexual fetishes. The hanky code quickly inspired imagery which became a visual representation of queer masculinity, responded to cultural shifts in the queer zeitgeist, and transitioned as an object for covert communication to an open signifier of queer identity.

Using a grounded theory approach, this thesis examines the history of the hanky code phenomenon, its evolution, and its cultural significance via appearances and references in art, entertainment, dress, literature, and media. This thesis will build on existing research through an examination of primary source material, a review of existing literature and research, and participant observation to establish the significance and impact of the hanky code on queer fashion, culture, and sexual identity formation and presentation.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

For centuries, the survival of queer community depended on the ability of queer men and women to either deny or disguise their sexual orientation and sexual identity.¹ In many cases this included the survival of queer individuals. A dominant heteronormative society perpetuated a culture of violence, intolerance, and discrimination toward sexual minorities. In order to endure the social mores imposed on queer individuals while simultaneously responding to acknowledging natural inclinations of same-sex desire, a system of covert linguistic, behavioral, and sartorial codes were created.² These codes covertly communicated ways to engage queer desire. In doing this, these codes also inadvertently and simultaneously laid the foundation for a queer subculture. These codes signaled queer identity, desire, or alliance and allowed the formation of communities and relative safe spaces for expressions of queerness and same-sex desire. Sartorial codes in particular enabled queer individuals to present embedded codes that signaled queerness while participating in contemporary fashion.

In the twentieth century, sartorial coding became an integral component of communicating queerness. As sexuality and gender identity were academically studied and researched, queer subcultures grew, thrived, proliferated, and evolved.

¹ The term “queer” will be used as an umbrella term to describe sexuality outside of normative heterosexuality such as homosexuality and bi-sexuality, as well as gender fluidity.

² Jonathan Green, *The Vulgar Tongue: Green’s History of Slang* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 279.

Expressions of queer masculinity were mostly underground and virtually non-existent in the mainstream, as many masculine-presenting queer men hid or repressed their sexuality. Feminine-presenting queer men had opportunities to distract from their sexual orientation by interweaving their emotional sensitivity, aesthetic sensibilities, or flamboyance (characteristics commonly associated with femininity) with dandyism, resulting in a presentation of sophistication or pedigree. The appropriated use of fashionable clothing to communicate an alternate male identity provided access to a queer subculture while allowing them to exist within a homophobic society through a buffer of dandyism. The rising visibility of subcultures in the mid-twentieth century prompted a reclamation of queer masculinity, in particular, through groups of male motorcycle aficionados or “biker” culture, and Bondage, Discipline, and Sado-Masochism (BDSM) culture.

Sartorial codes in the latter half of the twentieth century not only presented queer identity and desire, but made that desire more explicit. One such sartorial code was the hanky code.³ The hanky code is a sartorial coding phenomenon that advertised behavior-specific sexuality and sexual fetishism. In continuous use since the early 1970s by members of the queer BDSM subculture, the use of bandanas in various colors and tones began as a covert sartorial coding system to advertise sexual availability and to present queer sexuality, sexual fetishes, and the respective roles in said fetishes. Use of the hanky code grew in popularity and was coopted by the larger queer community, including those who did not identify as BDSM practitioners, but were interested in the covert search in public for sexual encounters. Through the

³ The terms “hanky” and “hankie” have been used interchangeably. For the purposes of this thesis, I will use “hanky” unless otherwise indicated in a citation.

decades, the hanky code continued almost exclusively as a component of BDSM dress, evolving to become more than a queer system of sartorial codes.

Mainstream contemporary American society has progressed in the acceptance of sexual minorities through visibility, representation and legislation. However, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) or queer culture is still seen as a subculture. Many LGBT individuals and communities across the country continue to be marginalized, and subjected to discrimination and violence. As a result of this marginalization, queer visibility takes on a sense of urgency, and academic study is part of this visibility.

While its impact on queer culture was significant, academic exploration of the hanky code has been minimal. Its history and influence on queer culture is not fully explored, documented, or represented in the existing academic literature of gay semiotics. Fashion historians who have written extensively on queer dress in the context of gender studies, fashion theory, and cultural studies in dress, have written little on the hanky code phenomenon. Literature which included writings on the hanky code have identified the hanky code as an outdated sartorial code, typically referenced in discussions related to queer male BDSM culture and dress. In some cases, the literature on the hanky code is relegated to a simple description of its purpose. As such, literature on the present-day use of the hanky code phenomenon and its evolution in contemporary queer dress or its impact on present-day queer culture is largely absent.

Using grounded theory as the research method, this study examines the history of the hanky code phenomenon, its evolution from covert system of communication to

conspicuous sartorial code integrating queer identity, desire, and agency. An analysis of existing hanky code related material culture found in repositories of LGBT art, history, and culture examines possible themes in practice, use, and adaptations throughout time. This study will also analyze the hanky code's impact on queer culture through references in art, literature, film, fashion, and appearances in popular culture, both queer and mainstream. This study examines how fashion historians and other academics contextualize the hanky code phenomenon, citing references and appearances in academic literature, analyzing the validity of these writings in comparison to other writings as well as over the course of time. Finally, this thesis studies contemporary practices of the hanky code phenomenon, tracing its evolution from covert sartorial coding system to a codified standard of queer dress which includes sexual behaviors and practices as a part of identity performance, expression and presentation. This paper contributes to the existing academic literature on cultural aspects of queer dress and identity.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Literature from academic and non-academic sources was reviewed to discover what the existing literature documented about the phenomenon. This included descriptions of the hanky code phenomenon, mostly in the context of queer subcultural dress. This chapter includes a review of various speculations associated with the origins of the hanky code phenomenon as well as twentieth-century queer sartorial coding used prior to the appearance of the hanky code. A brief history of the bandana as a sartorial signifier prior to its use in the hanky code has also been included. Literature by fashion theorists is reviewed for its application to the hanky code phenomenon. In addition to reviewing what has been written about the hanky code, academic literature was reviewed for what has been omitted.

BANDANA

The history of the bandana is long, and thoroughly documented through much academic study. The term “bandana” is derived from an East Indian Hindi word *bhanda*, which represents a particular type of resist-dyeing process on large silk or cotton handkerchief squares.⁴ More commonly known as tie-dyeing, the process consisted of fabric dyeing with wrapped segments not penetrated by dye, leaving a pattern of negative space.

⁴ Herbert Ridgeway Collins, *Threads of History: Americana Recorded on Cloth 1775 to the Present* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979), 2.

Bandanas were imported by the tens of thousands to New England from India in the late eighteenth century.⁵ Mechanical innovations in textile manufacturing during the nineteenth century allowed for more intricate and precise design motifs. The solid red color became known in the United States as turkey red named after the dye method used to create this fast red hue.⁶ By the end of the nineteenth century, synthetic dyes replaced natural dyes to expedite the application process of dyeing in a range of colors.⁷ Handkerchiefs with a paisley design (formerly known as a *buta* design) served as an alternative to the white cravats and handkerchiefs used by men. Initially printed on silk, bandanas were eventually printed on cotton. As cotton production of goods thrived in the United States, cotton bandanas became available and affordable. As a result, their identification as an upward social status symbol in America waned.

Bandanas have an extensive semiotic history with men's dress. In Rajasthan men wore the *bandhana* fabric as turban-cloths during festivals.⁸ Like many imported textiles prior to the nineteenth century, bandanas were considered a luxury item. Wealthy men wore bandanas as cravats or in the pockets of their trousers or frock coats, communicating their elevated economic and social status.

Once technology provided for the means of domestic production, bandanas became part of a stable of utilitarian fabrics for the working class, and became associated with more egalitarian forms of male dress, such as those worn by artists and cowboys.⁹ In the late nineteenth century bandanas were associated with cowboys and

⁵ Susan S. Bean, "The Indian origins of the bandanna" *Antiques*, December, 1999, 834.

⁶ Collins, 1979, 2.

⁷ Billie J. Collier, Martin Bide, and Phyllis G. Tortora, *Understanding Textiles* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2009), 404-405.

⁸ Jennifer Harris (ed.), *5000 Years of Textiles* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2010), 39, 111.

⁹ Ruth P Rubinstein, *Society's Child: Identity, Clothing, and Style* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), 95.

other men of the field who used them for protecting their necks against the sun and their mouths/noses against dirt and dust. American sailors wore bandanas as neckerchiefs, and African-American women (slave and free) used bandanas as head wrappings.¹⁰ According to Shaw and Bassett, Civil War soldier Henry Lane Stone “used a floral bandana to tie his boots together and hang them around his neck while he crept silently past the guards during his escape from Camp Douglas, Illinois.”¹¹

Bandanas and handkerchiefs were also used to commemorate important historic events, promote political campaigns, and celebrate military accomplishments from the eighteenth century into the twentieth century. In the nineteenth century, the ubiquitous use of bandanas in political campaigns inevitably became associated with specific campaigns and candidates.¹²

A series of political cartoons in *Judge* magazine, a weekly satirical magazine, demonstrated how bandanas were used as sartorial objects to communicate political messages. In these particular examples, bandanas were drawn in the trouser/pant pocket of male figures.¹³ (Figures 1a-b).

PRE-HANKY CODE GAY SEMIOTICS

Documentation of queer subcultures identified with a corresponding form of dress exists as early as the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.¹⁴ This

¹⁰ Bean, 1999, 834-835.

¹¹ Madelyn Shaw and Lynn Zacek Bassett, *Homefront & Battlefield: Quilts & Context in the Civil War* (Lowell: American Textile History Museum, 2012), 137.

¹² Collins, 1979, 2, 4.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 13-15.

¹⁴ Randolph Trumbach, “The Birth of the Queen: Sodomy and the Emergence of Gender Equality in Modern Culture, 1660-1750,” in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, (New York: Meridian, 1989), 138.

included the cross-gender dressing “mollies” of Great Britain or the extravagant, fashion-centric French “macaronis.”¹⁵ Cross-gendered dress became markers of sexual identity, as queer men adopted feminine dress and queer women adopted masculine dress.¹⁶ In the mid-nineteenth century the Aesthetic Movement (or Aestheticism), a rejection of the mass-industrialization of decorative arts which favored a meaningful, emotional approach, gained popularity and lasted into the early twentieth century.¹⁷ Effeminate-presenting queer men of a certain social class identified as dandies, a nineteenth-century male archetype which presented as sophisticated and artistic, traits which exaggerated male femininity. As such, effeminate-presenting queer men could find a home in Aestheticism. One of the most visible representatives of the Aesthetic Movement was the British writer and poet Oscar Wilde. Dressing in eighteenth-century knickers, jewel tones, and other non-traditional accoutrements, Wilde countered the sedateness of male dress and appearance conventions of late Victorian England. One such item was a green carnation which he wore on his lapel. The use of a green carnation signaled his affiliation with Aestheticism while it simultaneously signaled a queer identity.¹⁸

The Cult of The Purple Rose: A Phase of Harvard Life was a satirical commentary on the Aesthetic Movement among Harvard undergraduates in the 1890s.¹⁹ A group of Harvard undergraduates established an exclusive club for the

¹⁵ Valerie Steele, *A Queer History of Fashion: From the Closet to the Catwalk* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 13-15.

¹⁶ Jennifer Craik, *Uniforms Exposed: From Conformity to Transgression* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 222.

¹⁷ Aslin, Elizabeth, *The Aesthetic Movement: Prelude to Art Nouveau* (London: Elek Books Ltd., 1969), 15.

¹⁸ Craik, 2005, 222.

¹⁹ Neil Kane, ed., *Improper Bostonians: Lesbian and Gay History from the Puritans to Playland* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 89.

appreciation of visual and literary art. Members wore a purple rose on their lapel as a sartorial indicator of membership. Like Wilde and other aesthetes, the students adopted the use of an atypical flower to convey their association, as well as identity. References to the main male characters' effeminate demeanor (typically done as a way to infer homosexuality or sexual inversion in males) were indicated with passages such as "he was so delicate and so nervously constructed" and that "he entertained like a debutante and was better fitted for a parlor than a college club."²⁰ At one point in *The Cult of the Purple Rose* there is a discussion of *The Green Carnation*, a book by Robert Hichens published in 1894, whose lead characters were based on Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas. At the formation of the cult, one character described the details surrounding their membership, which included the wearing of purple roses as boutonnieres, purple handkerchiefs, and hat ribbons.²¹

Social mores followed the economy. Times of prosperity saw more lax attitudes and acceptance of fringe subcultures; conversely, times of scarcity and economic hardship reflected a harsher, sobering, more discriminating society. When the criminalization of homosexuality was enforced in the nineteenth century, the search for incriminating evidence focused on appearance. Ambroise-Auguste Tardiau's *Medicolegal Study of Assaults on Decency* (1857) identified pederasts as carrying "in one hand, a handkerchief, flowers, or some needlework: such is the strange, revolting, and rightfully suspect physiognomy that betrays the pederast..."²²

²⁰Shirley Everton Johnson, *The Cult of the Purple Rose: A Phase of Harvard Life* (Boston: The Gorham Press, 1902), 18.

²¹ Johnson, 1902, 63.

²² Steele, 2013, 18.

Wilde's appearance and relationships with men brought scrutiny to his personal life, and a prison conviction in 1895.

The use of bold colors, specifically red and green, became choice hues for communicating dandyism, flamboyance, and, therefore, homosexuality in the next few decades. According to Shaun Cole, red ties "were a signifier of homosexuality early in the twentieth century."²³ In an era of conservative color palettes for men, a red necktie would be considered an eccentric color choice or a penchant for flamboyant fashion and in some cases, a better known signifier of male homosexuality.²⁴ Wearing red goes back further, as documented by Ralph Werther's autobiography, who wore a "large red neck-bow with fringed ends" as a young person in the 1890s.²⁵ The color green was also a signifier in gay sartorial coding of the early twentieth century.

In *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940*, George Chauncey provided significant information on gay semiotics and sartorial coding prior to the hanky code. Writings from the collection of the Kinsey Institute Library, a significant research institute and repository of human sexuality, by a self-identified gay man named Thomas Painter in the late 1930s through the 1940s identified "'green suits' as distinctively homosexual attire" and "[d]ark brown and gray suede shoes were 'practically a homosexual monopoly.'" However, Chauncey added that green suits "were so bold that few dared wear them," and that other items of apparel, which sent the same message more subtly, were worn

²³ Shaun Cole, *'Don We Now Our Gay Apparel': Gay Men's Dress in the Twentieth Century (Dress, Body, Culture)* (New York: Berg, 2000), 113.

²⁴ Cole, 2000, 33.

²⁵ Steele, 2013, 18.

more commonly.²⁶ According to Jennifer Craik, suede shoes “retained gay connotations” into the 1950s and 1960s.²⁷

One of the more well known of these best kept secrets was the red tie. Used as a gay signifier from the late Victorian period into the 1940s, “the red tie was famous only in certain circles; it was a subtle signal likely to be understood in some contexts more than others. A man wearing a red necktie on a well-known New York cruising street such as Riverside Drive or Fourteenth Street, for instance, was likely to be labeled a fairy.”²⁸

Chauncey also referenced writings from Ralph Werther found in the Kinsey Institute Library, noting that Werther “proclaimed myself” as a fairy to working class youth on Fourteenth Street in the 1890s simply by wearing white kids [gloves] and [a] large red neck-bow with fringed ends hanging down over my lapels.” Like the hanky code, however, the environmental context of sartorial coding carried weight in its presentation. “[A] man wearing the same [red] tie in a social setting in which people were less alert to such signs might just be considered odd. In the right context, appropriating even a single feminine – or at least unconventional – style or article of clothing might signify a man’s identity as a fairy. An unconventional choice in an era of conservative colors, a red tie announced unorthodox tastes of another sort only to those in the know.”²⁹ And like the hanky code, Chauncey noted that earlier sartorial

²⁶ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male Underworld, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 52.

²⁷ Craik, 2005, 222.

²⁸ Chauncey, 1994, 51-52.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 51-52.

codes or “the semiotics of homosexuality seems to have been generally similar throughout North America” with “details varied between cities.”³⁰

Chauncey, along with other scholars and writers, cited the painting *The Fleet's In* by Paul Cadmus from 1934 as a significant example of the subtle yet powerful messaging of queer visibility through sartorial coding (Figure 2). Chauncey wrote that “the gay painter Paul Cadmus signaled the sexual character of a male civilian offering a cigarette to a sailor by giving him...a red tie” as well as other manicured and effeminate facial features.³¹ In the biography of Samuel Stewart, Justin Spring cites Paul Cadmus’s “scandalous homoerotic paintings” as an example of the cruising culture that would take place among the sailor class during World War II. Sailors were deemed as desirable among homosexual men. Their youth, vitality, social freedom, and extended periods of forced celibacy during active duty made “the sailor on shore leave...an archetype of sexual availability.” Cultural representations of them in art, music, and literature “establish[ed] the sailor as a figure of romantic and sexual longing.”³²

Chauncey argued that “[t]he myth of invisibility holds that, even if a gay world existed, it was kept invisible and thus remained difficult for isolated gay men to find. But gay men were highly visible figures in early-twentieth-century New York, in part because gay life was more integrated into the everyday life of the city in the prewar decades than it would be after World War II – in part because so many gay men boldly announced their presence by wearing red ties, bleached hair, and the era’s other

³⁰ Ibid., 387.

³¹ Ibid., 54.

³² Justin Spring, *Secret Historian: The Life and Times of Samuel Stewart, Professor, Tattoo Artist, and Sexual Renegade* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 82.

insignia of homosexuality.”³³ Valerie Steele also cited the depiction of “a gay man with bleached blond hair and a red neck tie” in *The Fleet’s In* while also arguing the visibility of gay men and lesbians in large cities, in particular New York City.³⁴

Shaun Cole specified the red necktie as “one of the better known signifiers of homosexuality...in America before the Second World War,” eventually losing its significance by World War II.³⁵ British journalists Simon Gage, Lisa Richards, and Howard Wilcot noted in *Queer* that “the red tie was a secret sign at the beginning of the century.”³⁶ In his biography, Harry Hay demonstrated his familiarity with sartorial codes of the time as he described his pastime of cruising in the 1930s: “If someone had a red tie or a lavender handkerchief, he might be – interesting.”³⁷ In the biography of Samuel Steward, Justin Spring notes that “[w]earing a red or lavender necktie was one of the coded ways in which homosexuals identified themselves – both to one another and to potential trade – in the years before gay liberation.” This was written as a footnote to explain the reference of red and lavender neckties by Steward in an essay for *Der Kreis*, commenting on the Illinois state legislation decriminalizing homosexual acts between consenting adults.³⁸

The Nazi regime of 1930s-40s Germany imposed the use of sartorial codes to identify various categories of prisoners as it related to their crimes, which included homosexuality. Initially, a yellow stripe or bar inscribed with a capital “A” (interpreted in the concentration camps to represent the word “Arschficker”, a slang

³³ Chauncey, 1994, 3.

³⁴ Steele, 2013, 29.

³⁵ Cole, 2000, 32-33.

³⁶ Simon Gage, Lisa Richards, Howard Wilcot, *Queer* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2002), 50.

³⁷ Stuart Timmons, *The Trouble with Harry Hay: Founder of the Modern Gay Movement* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1990), 62.

³⁸ Spring, 2010, 295-296.

reference to anal intercourse) or a large black dot and the number 175 painted on their uniform, which referred to the paragraph of the German sodomy law. A more elaborate color-coding system for prisoners was developed, where an inverted pink triangle was sewn onto the uniform to identify actual or perceived homosexuals.³⁹ The inverted triangle is later reclaimed as a symbol of LGBT identity.

Gay sartorial coding continued through the mid- to late-twentieth century with the use of bold-colored ties and pocket square handkerchiefs, reminiscent of colorful or exotic flowers on the lapel during the Aesthetic Period. Considered flamboyant by comparison to the muted or dark tones typically used in menswear, a brightly colored pocket square identified the wearer as a twentieth-century dandy, while simultaneously communicating a queer sexuality. Earrings worn by men have also communicated this queer sexuality well into the twentieth century. A letter to the editor of the *Boston Traveler* from Mr. F. Ricker from July 25, 1931 discloses the openness of queer self-identification through sartorial choices: "...[I] am in favor of men also wearing earrings. I would like to know if there are other men who also want to wear earrings...I myself have worn earrings many evening while out for a walk."⁴⁰

The period of the 1950s during the Cold War saw queer sexuality linked to moral perversion and pathology. The resulting persecution of homosexual men and women came to be known as the "lavender scare." According to Benjamin Shepard, "[i]n the 1950s discourse, communism, homosexuality, and sexual perversion were

³⁹ Erwin J. Haeberle, "Swastika, Pink Triangle, and Yellow Star: The Deconstruction of Sexology and the Persecution of Homosexuals in Nazi Germany," in *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York: Meridian, 1989), 376.

⁴⁰ Kane, 1998, 97.

linked into a single deviant story line.”⁴¹ Masculine presentation, behavior, and appearance became vital for overcoming government-sanctioned witch hunts. It is possible that the repressed, homophobic social climate of the 1950s prompted an influence in queer men’s style by working class culture.⁴² The film *The Wild One* introduced biker culture to American audiences and prompted the mainstreaming of biker culture. The leather jacket became a symbol of rebellion, ushering in a subculture of rugged masculinity and fraternity through the formation of motorcycle clubs, including gay ones⁴³. A masculine-presenting, queer male identity formed among bikers, military, cowboys, police, and other blue-collar professions dominated by men. Each of these archetypes had an associated form of dress that contributed significantly to a new gay masculinity. As they did for their heterosexual counterparts, these archetypes represented virility and an unapologetic sexuality, which as a queer-identified male, was liberating. This also presented dress as a way to advertise sexuality that included sexual availability.

In *BIKER BAR – Bikes, Beer, & Boys: a playful look at the roots of the leather bar*, author and illustrator Thom Magister described another sartorial code for bikers: the positioning of one’s belt buckle. Magister indicated that in the early 1950s “moving your belt buckle to the left or right, instead of the traditional center position, was a subtle clue indicating whether you preferred to ‘give’ or ‘take’ – or were dominant or submissive.” As a result, belt buckles worn to the left of center identified

⁴¹ Benjamin Shepard, “History, Narrative, and Sexual Identity: Gay Liberation and Postwar Movements for Sexual Freedom in the United States,” in *The Story of Sexual Identity: Narrative Perspectives on the Gay and Lesbian Life Course* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 23, 25.

⁴² Susan Kaiser, *Fashion and Cultural Studies* (London: Berg, 2012), 160.

⁴³ Diana Crane, *Fashion and its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 182.

the wearer as a top, while belt buckles worn to the right of center identified the wearer as a bottom. Magister added that chains around a boot or over a shoulder, where keys were hung from, and the adherence to uniform norms of only tops wearing leather were other ways of communicating sexual roles. Magister claimed that the “belt buckle was not necessarily a signal” toward the mid-1960s, when more leather shops opened, and the rigid rules of wearing leather became more relaxed.⁴⁴

Although the hanging of keys from one’s belt loop pocket was a common practice among bikers and other blue collar men, it was appropriated as a queer sartorial code. Where previous sartorial codes identified the wearer-participant’s ambiguous affiliation with the queer subculture or community, this new sartorial code further advertised sexual availability and role. The visibility of keys indicated that the wearer was either available for or an active seeker of a sexual encounter. Furthermore, keys hung from the wearer’s left or right side identified their respective sexual role as the dominant or submissive, active or passive, insertive or receptive participant during the act of anal intercourse. This nuance appeared to be the precursor to the hanky code’s binary construct of sexual roles.

THE HANKY CODE

Sartorial coding with the simultaneous identification of sexuality and sexual role designations continued with the use of bandanas, which eventually came to be known as the hanky code. The hanky code is a complex queer sartorial coding system

⁴⁴ Thom Magister, *Biker Bar – Bikes, Beer & Boys: a playful look at the roots of the leather bar* (New York City: Perfectbound Press, 2013), 25-26.

employing the use of bandanas to communicate sexual orientation, availability, sexual fetish of interest, and role in said fetish. Colors are assigned to a corresponding fetish, behavior or act. Placement of the bandana on the body, typically in the back pocket, informs the preferred role of each participant during the course of the sexual activity: The dominant/active/insertive participant, or “top” wears the bandana in his left back pocket, while the submissive/passive/receptive participant, or “bottom” wears the bandana in his right back pocket. Individuals interested in both roles of a particular activity are known as “versatile”. The search of a sexual partner typified by the act of walking through or standing in public and private queer spaces is known as “cruising”. The act of cruising while invoking the use of the hanky code is known as “flagging”.⁴⁵

Hanky code decoder lists were created to decipher and document color-fetish-role associations of the hanky code. Sometimes known as a “bandana color code” or “handkerchief code,” these decoders were available when purchasing bandanas from queer retail establishments, in particular erotica shops. Printed with information of the business on the reverse side, they served a dual purpose as advertising tools (Figures 3a-b). Eventually hanky codes were also reproduced and published in BDSM queer ephemera such as erotic magazines, newsletters for BDSM and motor cycle club groups, and with advertisements for leather bars and leather shops on flyers. These hanky codes would discreetly fit in one’s wallet or pocket, and were helpful for participants who did not commit the hanky code to memory. The hanky code could be referenced while cruising.

⁴⁵ Jack Rinella, *The Dictionary of Scene-Friendly Terms* (Chicago: Rinella Editorial Services, 2008), 59.

One of the first publications on the subject of gay semiotics is Hal Fischer's aptly titled *Gay Semiotics: a photographic study of visual coding among homosexual men*. Through photographs and text, Fischer identified other sartorial codes relating to sexual advertising, specifically the use of keys, a single-stud earring, and bandanas as "signifiers for a male response" which was illustrated with a photograph (Figure 4a).⁴⁶ Another photograph of the rears of two men with bandanas in their back pockets described the purpose of blue and red "handkerchiefs," to "signify behavioral tendencies through both color and placement," respectively: "A blue handkerchief placed in the right hip pocket serves notice that the wearer desires to play the passive role during sexual intercourse. Conversely, a blue handkerchief placed in the left hip pocket indicates that the wearer will assume the active or traditional male role during sexual contact...Red handkerchiefs are used as signifiers for behavior that is often regarded as deviant or abnormal. A red handkerchief located in the right hip pocket implies that the wearer plays the active role in anal/hand insertion (Figure 4b)."⁴⁷

At the time of publication Fischer concluded that "[t]hree basic signifiers are recognized: handkerchiefs, keys, and earrings." Fischer listed (dark) blue, red, yellow, and black bandanas, their respective sexual activities, and sexual role identification of associated with the left ("aggressive") and right ("passive") sides of the body according to the hanky code.⁴⁸ Fischer also described the early sales of bandanas for the purposes of hanky code flagging. He stated that The Trading Post, an LGBT

⁴⁶ Hal Fischer, *Gay Semiotics: A Photographic Study of Visual Coding Among Homosexual Men* (1977, Reprint, Los Angeles: Cherry and Martin, 2015), 7-12.

⁴⁷ Fischer, 2015, 8-9.

⁴⁸ [Ibid., 21.](#)

novelty and erotic merchandise store in San Francisco “began promoting handkerchiefs in the store and printing cards with their meanings” around 1971.⁴⁹

Various scholars have referenced the hanky code in the context of the history of the bandana as a textile, as well as in the context of queer cultural and identity studies. In the article “The Indian origins of the bandanna”, Textile historian Susan Bean wrote that “[b]andannas have been enlisted to signal...sexual orientation.”⁵⁰ In *The Language of Clothes*, Alison Lurie noted that “gays employ a sartorial signal system” where “those who wish to play...” use keys, bandanas, or an earring to identify an “active or masculine role” or a “passive or feminine role” in order to “facilitate an active and diverse lifestyle.”⁵¹ Fashion historian and theorist Susan Kaiser indicated in her book *Fashion and Cultural Studies* that “color-coded handkerchiefs, body piercings, tattoos, and other symbols [are]...used strategically to communicate not only male gayness...but also specific sexual proclivities”⁵² Fashion historians Andrew Reilly and Eirik J. Saethre focused on the hanky code in *The Hankie Code Revisited: From Function to Fashion*. The purpose of their research was “to document changes in the hankie code from its initial use as an instrument of communication” through a review of existing literature on the subject of gay semiotics, the hanky code and through interviews with gay men.⁵³ Fashion historian Shaun Cole integrated his discussion of the hanky code as part of a discussion about the gay male BDSM community in *Don We Now Our Gay Apparel: Gay Men’s Dress*

⁴⁹ Fischer, 2015, 20.

⁵⁰ Bean, 1999, 832.

⁵¹ Alison Lurie, *The Language of Clothes* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000), 259.

⁵² Kaiser, 2012, 160.

⁵³ Andrew Reilly and Eirik J Saethre, “The hankie code revisited: From function to fashion.” *Critical Studies in Men’s Fashion* 1, no. 1 (2014): 70.

in the Twentieth Century. Cole noted that “[colored] handkerchiefs in the back pocket became one of the most intricate and detailed systems of coding. The [colors] signified different sexual practices and the side of the body on which these were placed indicated the wearer’s preference for active or passive roles in that activity.”⁵⁴

Various sources indicated that the origins of the hanky code are uncertain. However, multiple origin stories have been formulated and disseminated throughout the queer community, through oral history and published sources. One such origin story attributed the creation of the hanky code to a late nineteenth-century remedy for same-gendered dancing constructs. Frontier (“Wild West”) and mining environments were comprised predominately of men. Bandanas were used to identify lead and follow positions in recreational dancing. Reilly and Saethre indicated that “an image...has been circulated around the Internet as ‘proof’ of the origins of the code.” They note that while “attempts to authenticate the image have yielded no definitive conclusions, it nonetheless demonstrates the prevalence of this origin story.”⁵⁵ In addition to Reilly and Saethre’s article, the image has also been published in *Dear Friends: American Photographs of Men Together, 1840-1918* by David Deitcher.⁵⁶ (Figure 5) In an essay about his work *Nature & Spirit: A Digital Lens of Gay Male Culture*, artist Brandon Gellis recounted a similar origin story. Gellis indicated that the hanky code was “[o]riginated by gay men in San Francisco after the gold rush” and “was a color-coded system common among steam railroad engineers, miners, and

⁵⁴ Cole, 2000, 112.

⁵⁵ Reilly, Saethre, 2014, 72

⁵⁶ David Deitcher, *Dear Friends: American Photographs of Men Together, 1840-1918* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2001), 33.

cowboys in the Western [United States].”⁵⁷ Cole’s research led him to the November 1953 edition of *One* magazine, which “ran an appeal for information on customs in the Early West from a reader who ‘had heard that blue and red bandanas were worn around the wrist or neck to designate who was dancing the male and female parts at pioneer square dances when there weren’t enough gals to go around’”.⁵⁸

Reilly, Saethre, Gellis, and Cole also described a secondary origin story, which conceived of the hanky code’s origins in New York City. Reilly and Saethre noted “[a]n alternative story to the code’s origin is that the code was originally suggested by a *Village Voice* journalist in the early 1970s as a way to announce one’s sexual position.”⁵⁹ Gellis noted that “[m]odern iterations of the hanky code started in New York City in the early 1970s to indicate one’s sexual preference” and “mirrored traditional gender roles” by “announc[ing] one’s acquaintance with dominant and submissive roles.”⁶⁰ Cole indicated that the *Village Voice* article suggested interchangeable meanings for red and blue bandanas, despite noting Fischer’s conclusion that red and blue bandanas already had sexual practice or fetish associations.⁶¹ Gage, Richards, and Wilmot determined the hanky code originated in 1970s New York City “to communicate gay men’s desires, and world-renowned newspaper, the *Village Voice* is actually credited as its source.” They claimed that an article was published “suggesting that it would be easier for gay men...to pick each other up if they didn’t only have to rely on wearing keys in their back pockets” and

⁵⁷ Brandon S. Gellis, “Nature & Spirit: A Digital Lens of Gay-Male Culture.” *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture* 16, no. 1, (2017): 4.

⁵⁸ Cole, 2000, 113.

⁵⁹ Reilly and Saethre, 2014, 72

⁶⁰ Gellis, 2017, 4.

⁶¹ Cole, 2000, 113.

“suggested that they should all get down to the surplus store” to purchase bandanas in varying colors.⁶²

Regardless of its origins, by the mid-1970s the hanky code phenomenon had become a well-known practice within the queer male community. Hanky code related imagery proliferated the community via ephemera and became a short-hand designation for queer male identity. According to Reilly and Saethre, the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s led to a decrease in anonymous sexual activity, which relegated the use of the hanky code to subcultural status within the BDSM community.⁶³ John D’Emilio wrote that “[t]he network of sexual meeting places that fostered recreational sex among gay men provided a hospitable environment for the rapid spread of the virus” in mid-1980s San Francisco, California.⁶⁴ Changes in the sexual landscape prompted changes in the hanky code through the addition of other sexual fetishes. In the late 1990s into the early 2000s, an interest in the hanky code phenomenon resurged. When the use of various colors and tones appeared to be exhausted, other forms of textiles such as lame, flannel, and lace, dual colors to represent a fetish, and non-textile objects were included. A multitude of fetishes were represented, and with that representation came awareness and visibility of sexual practices that became an integral component of the practitioner’s identity, expressed through dress.

⁶² Gage, Richards, and Wilcot, 2002, 83.

⁶³ Reilly and Saethre, 2014, 70.

⁶⁴ John D’Emilio, “Gay Politics and Community in San Francisco Since World War II,” in *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York: Meridian, 1989), 472.

FASHION AND DRESS THEORY

The evolution of the use of bandanas, especially in the context of sartorial communication are consistent with established theories about fashion and dress. Malcolm Barnard stated that “fashion and clothing are forms of nonverbal communication that exceeds the literal meaning of those slogans or brand names.” He compared the two schools of thought where the garment or item of clothing acts as a medium through which an individual speaks “to another person with the intention of effecting some change” and “must be in principle retrievable or discoverable.”⁶⁵ He noted that in the semiotic or structuralist model of communication, “communication makes an individual into a member of a community.”⁶⁶ The implication is that “the structured system of meanings, a culture, enables individuals to construct an identity by means of communication.”⁶⁷

Diana Crane references Simmel’s theory of fashion and Bourdieu’s theory of class reproduction. Simmel’s theory is predicated on the idea that fashion practices trickled down from the dominant (elite) culture to the lower classes through simulation. Bourdieu’s theory extrapolated this idea and suggested the dissemination of fashion through a complex social structure where certain strata or classes were associated with a respective lifestyle.⁶⁸ Richard Martin and Harold Koda suggested that, like women’s fashion, the development of men’s style can also originate at the apex of the economic and social classes and will “trickle down,” to “vernacular dress

⁶⁵ Malcolm Barnard, *Fashion as Communication* (London: Routledge, 1996), 30.

⁶⁶ Barnard, 1996, 31.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁶⁸ Crane, 2000, 6-7.

or street fashion”.⁶⁹ Such was the case for bandanas, as their function transitioned from decorative to utilitarian when their presence as a fashion object shifted from exclusive to ubiquitous.

Susan Kaiser’s writing on subject position/formation and the intersectionality of identity through fashion-style-dress inform sexuality as an intersectional component of identity which includes sexual proclivities, behaviors, or practices. Through the performative aspect of wearing a bandana in the back pocket to invoke the hanky code, Kaiser “reminds us that it is not just what one wears that matters, but also how one...dresses the body that tells us about everyday processes of subject formation and the interplay between subjectivity and the subject positions people inhabit.”⁷⁰

Regarding intersectionality, Kaiser writes that it “can be applied to sexuality through the nexus of the body, the imagination, and community building, as well as multiple modes of subject-formation...sexuality is much more than being turned on. It also includes a personal sense of agency and identity, and a need to belong and express connections through time and space.”⁷¹

Cindy Patton identified the hanky code as “[o]ne of the most interesting products of [gay male] culture.” She defined the hanky code as “the expanding semiotic use of bandanas of different colors indicating the specific preferences of individual men.” She also notes that “[w]hile [the hanky code] is viewed as a commodification of sex, it was also the embodiment of a sexual ethic. On a practical level, use of the code avoided the problem of getting home with a person of

⁶⁹ Richard Martin and Harold Koda, *Jocks and Nerds: Men’s Style in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989), 45.

⁷⁰ Kaiser, 2012, 31.

⁷¹ Kaiser, 2012, 171.

[in]compatible practices. But even more, the hanky code rested on the assumption that sex was to be negotiated between rough equals. Choosing a hanky or hankies drew identity and practice together in an articulation of who one was sexually and how one expected to enact sex. In Foucaultian terms, the hanky code was a discourse about the care of the self.”⁷²

OMISSIONS

Cole’s essay for *A Queer History of Fashion: From the Closet to the Catwalk*, titled “Queerly Visible: Gay Men, Dress, and Style 1960-2012” omitted discussion of the hanky code and the gay male BDSM scene from the discussion of hyper-masculine identity in gay dress, despite the essay’s “attempt to articulate some of the ways in which...gay men have negotiated matters of their sexual identity and personal appearance.”⁷³ Three other essays in *A Queer History of Fashion* mentioned the wearing of bandanas or handkerchiefs, but only two related it to the purpose of sexual coding or communication, of which only one essay explicitly identified it as the hanky code.⁷⁴ In *Queer Style* by Adam Geczy, the chapter dedicated to BDSM dress and appearance described “the accoutrements, dress codes, and role-playing that are associated with these particular queer styles,” but did not reference hanky code as an identifiable part of fetishistic dress.⁷⁵ In *FETISH: Fashion, Sex & Power*, fashion historian Valerie Steele listed the handkerchief as an “inanimate fetish object”.⁷⁶

⁷² Cindy Patton, “Notes for a genealogy of safe sex,” *Sexualities: Critical Concepts in Sociology* vol. 4 no. 71 (2002): 179.

⁷³ Shaun Cole, “Queerly Visible: Gay Men, Dress, and Style 1960-2012” in *A Queer History of Fashion: From the Closet to the Catwalk* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 136.

⁷⁴ Steele, 2013, 47, 78, 228.

⁷⁵ Adam Geczy and Vicki Karaminas, *Queer Style* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 10.

⁷⁶ Valerie Steele, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 26.

Steele also discussed the history of leather in the context of fetishism and sexuality in a subsection of Chapter 6 titled “Leathersex.” Despite the discussion of gay male leather dress and appearance, references to the hanky code were absent.⁷⁷

In *Gay Planet* by Eric Chaline, the hanky code was presented in one column with the color and fetish next to a representative color tone. This presentation breaks from the more commonly used composition with the color in the center, and sexual roles on each side. An introductory paragraph informed the reader that “[c]olored handkerchiefs worn in the back pocket are a shorthand for sexual preferences” and that “worn on the left, they indicate that the wearer plays an active role, and on the right, the passive role.” Chaline warned that “the meanings of the minor colors can vary.”⁷⁸

In *Queer* by Simon Gage, Lisa Richards, and Howard Wilmot, the hanky code is referred to as a “throwback to ye olde world gay times” and that despite this there are “actually 138 different shades to signal just exactly what your sexual preference is before you have to engage in any of that stupid chatting-up malarkey.” They described the hanky code as “dying out now, [but] you can still pick out a fister from a fistee, for example, if you head to the right kind of clubs.”⁷⁹ While the language used here is intended to be humorous, this passage identifies the importance of environmental context in contemporary use of the hanky code. In an ethnographic study of expressive work settings in gay pornography and sex paraphernalia shops, Kenneth Perkins and James Skipper interviewed employees and clients of two shops geared toward servicing the queer male community. They noted that part of the language used by the

⁷⁷ Ibid., 154.

⁷⁸ Eric Chaline, *Gay Planet: All Things for All Gay Men* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000), 92.

⁷⁹ Gage, Richards, Howard, 2002, 83.

subjects was “exemplified by a series of descriptions of non-verbal cues of sex act preference, the hanky color code.” According to Perkins and Skipper, “[t]he hanky color code denoted pocket signals that identified roles individuals wished to play 32 acts of pleasure” and that the “signals seemed to be common knowledge among those...interviewed.” An uncited table of a hanky code is included in the essay, of which the source was more than likely a hanky code directly from one of the shops. Given that the study was published in 1981, this hanky code most likely dates to approximately the same time the research was published.⁸⁰

Reilly and Saethre discussed little regarding the evolution of the hanky code beyond its identification with gay male BDSM subculture. That article also implied recent use of the hanky code in the heterosexual BDSM subculture as “new behaviour.”⁸¹ However, there is evidence of hanky code awareness in the heterosexual BDSM community as early as the mid-1990s, and most likely earlier.⁸²

Reilly and Saethre also noted that the hanky code is no longer in use the way it was intended, but used more as an “ironic statement” and as an “aesthetic choice.”⁸³ Although this may be the case for some individuals, preliminary research shows that active use of the hanky code by the LGBTQ BDSM community for the purpose of communicating sexual fetishes continued through the 1980s, 1990s, and into present day. Other examples of the evolutionary direction of the hanky code were not included

⁸⁰ Kenneth B. Perkins and James K. Skipper, Jr., “Gay pornographic and sex paraphernalia shops: An ethnography of expressive work settings,” *Deviant Behavior: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 2, no. 2 (1981): 194-195.

⁸¹ Reilly and Saethre, 2014, 75.

⁸² Mitch Kessler (ed.), “Hanky Panky: A Guide Through the Symbol Jungle,” *The SandMUtopian Guardian* 29 (1998): 41.

⁸³ Reilly and Saethre, 2014, 76.

in the essay, such as the integration of other items of clothing in a color specific to the hanky code.

There may be several reasons why discussion of the hanky code is omitted from various sources of literature. The absence of a discussion on the hanky code in Geczy's *Queer Style*, may result from focused research within Australia and the United Kingdom where the impact of the hanky code phenomenon is minimized by comparison to the United States. While Steele's *FETISH: Fashion, Sex, & Power* does not reference the hanky code or discuss bandanas as sexual communication, but rather identified a handkerchief as an actual object of sexuality itself. Bandanas are also used as sexual objects, in particular mouth gags or blindfolds. In pornographic imagery, the bandana serves this duality of sex object and as a system to covertly promote the practice and promulgation of fetishes and fetish culture.

Alison Lurie's engendering of sexual roles in her description of the hanky code by describing "active" as masculine, and "passive" as feminine, demonstrated a lack of understanding or a dismissal of the complexity of human sexuality.⁸⁴ Although Lurie cited Fischer's *Gay Semiotics* as a source, Fischer never included descriptors such as masculine or feminine. He did, however, describe the act of anal intercourse when flagging navy blue on the left that "indicates that the wearer will assume the active or traditional male role during sexual contact."⁸⁵ While this language may have been acceptable in describing the mechanics of sexual intercourse to a general audience, it is an oversimplification of queer sexuality. It perpetuates a binary,

⁸⁴ Lurie, 2000, 259.

⁸⁵ Fischer, 2015, 8.

heteronormative perspective, negating the presence of feminine-presenting tops or masculine presenting bottoms.

Martin Levine included a hanky code-like chart listing “sexual proclivities indicated by the color of the bandanas.” Instead of citing a pre-existing hanky code, this list was “compiled by asking the men about their significations.” According to Levine, “Blue was by far the most popular color.”⁸⁶ It is unclear why Levine does not refer to his list as a hanky code, nor does he mention “hanky code” in the entirety of his book, despite clearly articulating the hanky code phenomenon in this chapter. Furthermore, although Levine referenced BDSM masters and slaves when describing tops and bottoms, the presentation of the hanky code by Levine was in the context of the book’s subject (gay clones), and not gay leathermen, who have consistently been the primary users of the hanky code.

Barnard wrote that “The unifying function of fashion and clothing serves to communicate membership of a cultural group both to those who are members of it and to those who are not.”⁸⁷ While the hanky code initially covertly communicated membership to queer individuals, it communicated nothing to non-queer individuals. The bandana was a key to a world inhabited by queer desire.

This review of literature presents what is currently available on the hanky code phenomenon, its sartorial precursors, and its relation to fashion theory as a cultural dress phenomenon. Despite this, much academic scholarship on the hanky code beyond the mid-1980s is absent. Most notably absent are discussions on contemporary hanky code practices as it became integrated with queer identity.

⁸⁶ Levine, 1998, 66.

⁸⁷ Barnard, 1996, 60.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This thesis is a qualitative study blending archival research, participant observation, and data collection, analysis, and synthesis. The grounded theory approach was applied as the preferred methodology for this study, given the extent of information gathered, as well as the existing academic literature on the topic. The scope of this study is intended to provide a framework, and limitations of this study are addressed.

GROUNDING THEORY

Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss described grounded theory as “the discovery of theory from data” and “can be presented either as a well-codified set of propositions or in a running theoretical discussion, using conceptual categories and their properties.”⁸⁸ Grounded theory is used across many disciplines including gender studies and cultural studies. According to Janice Morse, grounded theory “enables not only the documentation of change within social groups, but understanding of the core process central to that change. Grounded theory enabled the identification and description of phenomena, their main attributes, and the core, social or social psychological process, as well as their interactions in the trajectory of change.” Morse

⁸⁸ Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1967), 1, 31.

also indicates that grounded theory analysis “provides us with the tools to synthesize these data, yet is generalizable to other instances and to future instances.”⁸⁹

Despite the limited academic literature on the hanky code phenomenon, much non-academic literature exists in the form of magazine articles, essays, and writings. Furthermore, primary sources of hanky code ephemera such as decoder lists, hanky code imagery, and oral histories provide a significant base of primary source information on which to draw theories. In one example of grounded theory applied in the study of the queer BDSM subculture, Mosher, Levitt, and Manley conducted interviews of six gay-identified male BDSM practitioners (identified as in the study as “leathermen”) to examine the relationship between their gender and sexual identity as it relates to ownership of their identity as “leathermen” and the process of identity development.⁹⁰

SCOPE

Existing academic literature on dress and identity, queer identities, queer subcultures, LGBT dress, was researched and analyzed for pertinent information contributing to the academic validity of this thesis. In addition to academic literature and secondary source material, analysis of primary source material was critical to the academic study of this topic. As a result, visits to queer spaces with the availability of

⁸⁹ Janice M. Morse, “Tussles, Tensions, and Resolutions.” in *Developing Grounded Theory: The Second Generation* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, Inc., 2009), 13-14.

⁹⁰ Chad M. Mosher, Heidi M. Levitt, and Eric Manley, “Layers of Leather: The Identity Formation of Leathermen as a Process of Transforming Meanings of Masculinity” *Journal of Homosexuality* vol. 51, no. 3 (2006): 93.

literature, ephemera and objects were required. Primary source material included, but was not limited to:

- Hanky code lists/decoders/keys/legends from various time periods;
- Bandanas and other items of dress with a documented history of hanky code flagging, created for the purposes of hanky code flagging, or inspired by the hanky code phenomenon;
- Magazine and newsletter articles, essays, and announcements related to fetishes with its hanky code themed illustrations;
- Oral histories, memoirs, and biographies with references to the hanky code, flagging, or other forms of queer sartorial coding;
- Photography, drawings, paintings, illustrations, film, music, performance, and other forms of art or artistic expression which referenced the hanky code phenomenon or was inspired by it, either directly or indirectly.

The study of hanky code related imagery consisted of evaluating compositional details such as color and placement of bandanas, bodies, and background, as well as image creation date, and other information regarding artistic intent and motivation to create such images. The purpose of image analysis provided additional insight into the significance of the hanky code in LGBTQ culture.

The geographic scope of this thesis was limited to the United States. Public repositories such as museums, archives, and libraries were one source of historic material, while BDSM social events and queer retail establishments were a source of contemporary materials. The following five organizations were identified for research

visits based on their significant holdings of queer material and the ability to visit each site with relative ease:

- GLBT Historical Society – San Francisco, California⁹¹
- The History Project – Boston, Massachusetts
- Leather Archives & Museum – Chicago, Illinois
- Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art – New York, New York
- Sexual Minorities Archives – Holyoke, Massachusetts

Four of the six site visits identified in this thesis are located in the eastern part of the country, while one is located in the Midwest, and one on the West Coast. Although the holdings of most repositories are not restricted by geography, each site's collections contain primary source material connected to their respective local LGBT communities. Given the existence of documents which place the hanky code's origins in the United States, specifically San Francisco, it was imperative to visit The GLBT Historical Society, which holds one of the largest LGBT archives in the United States.

Lack of digitized or electronically available information also prompted the need to visit these repositories in person. While some repositories have an online searchable database, most do not, and those that do, do not have hanky code ephemera (lists/decoders/keys/legends) available online as either searchable document or historic object.

Some of the research visits to these repositories coincided with queer and BDSM events. These annual events bring queer BDSM participants, tourists,

⁹¹ Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender

journalists, scholars, and the curious. The following events were attended in the context of participant observation to document contemporary hanky code practices:

- International Mr. Leather (IML) – Chicago, Illinois
- Folsom East – New York, New York
- Up Your Alley – San Francisco, California
- Mates Leather Weekend – Provincetown, Massachusetts
- LGBT Pride Parades/Marches – New York, New York; Boston, Massachusetts; Providence, Rhode Island

All BDSM events listed included at least one, if not multiple, vendors of bandanas for the purpose of hanky code flagging. Additionally, brick-and-mortar queer retail establishments were also visited to learn if bandanas were sold for the purposes of hanky code flagging in a more permanent setting. Three stores visited included Marquis (Boston, Massachusetts), Mr. S Leather (San Francisco, California), and Leather 64Ten (Chicago, Illinois). Each of these stores had a display of bandanas for sale for the purpose of hanky code flagging.

Additional research was conducted on the internet to learn more about the hanky code's evolution via and response to internet and social media culture. Sources included:

- Hanky code related writings in online (social) media outlets;
- Online hanky code decoders lists;
- Use of hanky code flagging in queer networking apps such as Grindr, Scruff, and Recon;
- Online hanky code related images and video.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Information from fifty-two hanky code decoder lists from the mid-1970s to 2014 was collected as data for the purpose of a comparative analysis. This comparative analysis was employed as a method to generate theory, consistent with the grounded theory approach.⁹² This information included, but was not limited to:

- Names of colors and fetishes associated with its respective color;
- The sexual role designated to each color/fetish association as defined by left and right placement (top and bottom respectively);
- Order of color/fetish appearance on the list from top to bottom;
- The intended audience of certain decoder lists according to gender, sexuality, or other characteristics;
- Actual or approximate date of creation, distribution, or publication;
- Medium and/or type of presentation (magazine, book, newsletter, flyer, business card, photograph, illustration, etc.);
- Geographic location of creation, distribution, or publication.

All decoder lists examined were primary source material and existed as hard-copy lists prior to the analysis. Analysis and synthesis of this data was expected to produce additional insight into the chronology of the hanky code's evolution, such as color-fetish-role consistencies, inconsistencies, and patterns; description of fetishes using queer vernacular and other vocabulary; distinguishing early decoder lists from

⁹² Glaser and Strauss, 1967, 21.

later ones through color-fetish-role associations and introductions; and regional differences in color-fetish-role associations.

LIMITATIONS

One challenge to completing this study was the travel to some of the repositories and events identified for this study. In order to establish a significant scope of primary sources for review, it was necessary to visit repositories in multiple locations across the country, in particular. With additional resources, research visits to the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction at Indiana University and the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives at the University of Southern California (USC) Libraries would have been planned.

Another challenge was dating the hanky code decoder lists. In many cases decoder lists in the collections of queer archives and museums were not accessioned objects nor were they cataloged with information regarding provenance. Decoder lists were typically housed in a folder titled “hanky codes”. Some decoder lists contained additional information which could be used to determine its approximate age. For example, decoder lists printed as part of an advertisement for a defunct leather bar could be dated to the time the bar was in operation. Other examples of ways to determine the age of decoder list advertisements include the absence of an area code in a telephone number, changes in the location or address, or the presence of a website or email address. Although the age of a decoder list published in a magazine may be determined by its publication date, the list itself may have been derived from an older source.

A third challenge was the inability to browse certain collections. Policies at each repository varied regarding access to materials. Some allowed free reign to explore the stacks of where the materials were housed, while others had specific protocols on requesting materials which were brought by an employee or volunteer. In requesting some materials via the internal database, the term “hanky code” was not a cross-referenced term for some sources. Other terms related to queer sexuality were employed for database searches. Terms including “flagging,” “cruising” “leathermen” “BDSM” were used to locate sources which may have included information about the hanky code.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This chapter presents findings from the decoder analysis and participant observations in light of the review of literature. The significance of the cultural impact of the hanky code is examined by references in art, entertainment, and fashion. This includes how the hanky code evolved from covert sartorial coding to become a component of queer identity formation and presentation.

DECODER LISTS

Many hanky codes examined were identical in the order of colors and fetishes they represented, making it likely that they originated from the same source. Slight deviations, such as changes in the order, color/fetish associations, and the absence of fetishes can be attributed to the whim of the person re-creating the hanky code either in terms of their own fetishes or the fetishes they wanted to promulgate.

In total, fifty-two printed copy hanky codes were analyzed. Hanky codes fell into three categories:

- A “basic” hanky code: hanky codes with up to twenty color-fetish associations were identified. These tended to be earlier hanky codes, from the 1970s and 1980s, intended for use by queer men.
- A “lesbian” hanky code: hanky codes specifically created for and used by lesbians and queer female-identified members of the BDSM community.

- An “expanded” hanky code: hanky codes with more than twenty color-fetish associations. These hanky codes tended to be later, from the 1990s forward, (although there are expanded hanky codes from the early 1980s), and fetishes are presented in gender-neutral context.

The earliest hanky codes examined were from 1975, 1978, and 1979. The earliest hanky code from 1975 was published with an article in the Boston motorcycle club *Entre Nous*’ Newsletter, titled *Nous Letter*.⁹³ It was a re-print of an article originally printed in the *Gay Community News*.

Additionally, comparative analysis demonstrated that the majority of the fetishes identify the right flagging role as the bottom to represent receptive, passive, or submissive acts associated with a fetish. Some fetishes consist of the identity of the person versus a behavior, action or practice. This “identity fetishism” calls into play the identity of the person either regardless of their role, or because of it. In such identity fetishism, the individual who claims the fetishized identity flags on the left, while the fetishizer, also known as the chaser, flags right (except for lavender to flag drag queen, where the self-identifying drag queen flags right, while the chaser flags left). In the designation of roles, the hanky code follows many of the predetermined roles consistent with heteronormative gender identity roles. We see this in the identity fetishes, where the left-flagging role is the self-identifier or object of fetishistic desire, while the right-flagging role is the chaser or fetishizer. This is true of most fetishes listed except for drag queen (lavender) and star (gold lamé).

⁹³ Scene and Machine, “Hanky...Panky,” *Nous Letter*, vol. 4 no. 6, (April 1975): 11.

The following color-fetish associations appear to be consistent through time, with little or no change occurring:

- Red is identified as the fetishization of brachioproctic (or brachiovaginal) insertion, more commonly known as “fisting.”
- Dark blue, also called navy blue, represents an interest in anal intercourse.
- Light blue represents an interest in fellatio, or oral sex. The top receives fellatio, and the bottom executes it.
- Yellow and brown represent the fetishes urolagnia and coprophilia, respectively. Slang names used in the hanky code for urolagnia include “piss play”, “golden showers” or “watersports”, while coprophilia has been consistently referred to as “scat.” Before the practice of anal douching, “being browned” was a slang term referring to anal penetration between men.⁹⁴
- Green for the identification of a prostitute (commonly referred as “hustler” if male) and client (commonly referred to as a “john”). Some hanky codes will specify the color as “kelly green” in order to distinguish it from “hunter green,” a darker green which represents the fetishization of older/younger scenarios, commonly known as “daddy/boy” or “daddy/son” flagging, where the top flags left if he identifies as a “daddy” and the bottom flags right if he identifies as a “boy”, “son”, or “daddy hunter”.
- For the basic and expanded hanky codes, the color “mustard” indicates a fetishism for a large penis, specifically identified as someone whose penis

⁹⁴ George Chauncey, Jr., “Christian Brotherhood or Sexual Perversion? Homosexual Identities and the Construction of Sexual Boundaries in the World War I Era” in *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York: Meridian, 1989), 298.

measures eight inches or more in length. Flagging left identifies the top as the person with the large penis; flagging right identifies the bottom as the large penis enthusiast. The lesbian hanky code repurposed the color.

- In earlier (basic) hanky codes, black is associated with the use of a whip for sexual gratification. The top engages in the act of whipping; the bottom is the recipient of said whips. However, later (extended) hanky codes expands the color-fetish association of black as “heavy S&M.” In this more broadly defined terminology, the top is the active participant, doling out erotic corporal punishment, while the bottom is the recipient of said punishment.
- Flagging orange left identifies the top as someone who is interested in “anything, anytime”. Early hanky codes identify right-flagging orange as “nothing, now”, which indicates that the wearer is not interested in any sexual activity during the course of their flagging. Later (expanded) hanky codes have redefined the color-fetish association as anytime top for left, and anything bottom for right. While the flagging orange left has a consistent message, the message for orange right is significantly different, depending on what hanky code is being referenced.
- Purple represents the fetishization of body piercing. This may include the act of body piercing during an encounter or sexual attraction to individuals who are pierced. In many hanky codes, flagging left identifies the top as a piercer, and the bottom as the one to be pierced.
- Of all the basic and expanded hanky codes reviewed, all but one identify the greenish-blue color of robin’s egg blue as the fetish for mutual simultaneous

fellatio, more commonly known as “sixty-nining” Given the equalizing nature of the act, some hanky codes express the roles as all or nothing, similarly to orange in early hanky codes. The top flags left as an active seeker, while the bottom flags right as interested in anything else. The lesbian hanky code repurposes the color for other fetishes.

- In the basic and expanded hanky codes, lavender represents the fetishization of male to female cross-dressing more commonly referred to as drag queens. The top flags left as someone interested in a drag queen, while the bottom flags right as someone who identifies as a drag queen. The definition of drag queen may have evolved in comparison to other forms of cross-gender dressing, such as transvestitism and transgender dressing.
- Brown-green, more commonly known as olive green (or olive drab), represents the fetishization of military uniforms. The top flags left to identify as a member of the military; the bottom flags right if they are sexually interested in someone who identifies as a member of the military.

No documented information exists regarding the selection process for color-fetish associations. While most of the colors-fetish associations seem arbitrary, a correlation can be made between some color-fetish associations, making these selections appear more deliberate. Some examples of these straightforward color-fetish associations include:

- Yellow to represent the color of urine;
- Brown to represent the color of feces;

- Black to represent the color of black leather used in clothing or equipment of BDSM practitioners;
- Green to represent the color of money;
- White to represent the color of ejaculated semen;
- Olive green to represent the color used in military clothing, in particular army uniforms. More recent decoder lists have since included handkerchiefs printed with a military camouflage motif to represent the military fetish, but “olive drab” is still used accordingly.

In many of the expanded hanky codes, lighter tones of a color represent a slightly different version of an adjacent fetish. When compared to their lighter tones of the same color, these fetishes appeared to be a relatively less extreme, or “lighter” version of the original fetish evaluated. (Table 1).

Once the use of single-color tones appeared to be exhausted, the use of dual-colors in a pattern was introduced. In an article for *Gay Community News*, Cindy Patton noted that a “safe sex” hanky was created in 1984 by a group in Texas in response to the AIDS epidemic. The black and white check print “constructed safe sex as a single practice or set of practices, under which might fall variations. This formed a new logical structure for thinking safe sex.”⁹⁵ The introduction of the black and white checkered handkerchief was an acknowledgment of the importance of safe(r) sex practices, such as condom use (Figures 6a-b). Patton acknowledged that “[t]he black and white checked hanky constructed safe sex as a single practice or set of

⁹⁵ Chris Lacharite and Cindy Patton, “Health Matters – Putting the sex back in safer sex: Promoting a new kind of safer sex, AIDS Educators at Boston AIDS Action Committee plan to train gay men to teach one another in the bars and the bushes about sexual options and mutual caring,” *Gay Community News*, April 16-22, 1989, vol. 16, no. 39, p. 11.

practices, under which might fall variations... The safe sex hanky did, however, make safe sex a positive choice rather than a limitation, and laid the groundwork for constructing a notion of self – an identity – around safe sex.” Furthermore, Patton also described “[i]n symbolic terms, the strategy was to keep the hanky code and the negotiation structure it represented, but makes some changes in the conduct of particular preferences (largely in the navy blue hanky of anal intercourse) to prevent transmission of the postulated virus.”⁹⁶ Guy Baldwin, psychotherapist and longtime member of the BDSM community, indicated that the “checkered flag represents urgency,” which emphasized the scale of the disease.⁹⁷ The checkered pattern “emphasizes the wearer’s commitment to pursuing each activity safely.”⁹⁸ In referencing the hanky code as a tool for safe(r) sex, Patton noted that “[i]t seems really important to me...to go back to the sensibility of the hanky code – that there are tons of sexual options...”⁹⁹

Another use of dual-color patterned handkerchiefs represented ethnicity or racially-based fetishizations as early as 1983.¹⁰⁰ These additions may have been a response to or an acknowledgment of people of color in the BDSM community. Using hanky code protocol, a non-white ethnic identity is presented as the fetish with a corresponding color (black, brown, and yellow for Black, Latino, and Asian

⁹⁶ Patton, 2002, 179.

⁹⁷ Conversation with Guy Baldwin, June 23, 2016.

⁹⁸ Robert Davolt, “Drummer Hanky History,” *International Drummer*, no. 206, July 1997, 21.

⁹⁹ Lacharite, Patton, 1989, 11.

¹⁰⁰ Michael Stevens, ed., *The Calendar*, vol. 3 no. 7 (April 8-21, 1983), from the Digital Collections of The University of Texas at San Antonio, <https://server16018-contentdm-oclc-org.fscproxy.framingham.edu/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/p16018coll7&CISOPTR=2319&REC=1>, accessed February 12, 2018.

respectively) with alternating white stripes, and with top and bottom role designations to represent anal intercourse. (Table 2a)

Given that the non-white stripe in this series of these handkerchiefs is associated with a designated ethnic/racial group, the white stripe is most likely associated with Caucasians, or White-presenting individuals. Primary users of this series of hanky code handkerchiefs were therefore most likely intended to be White. While this may have been an unintended consequence, the inclusion of this series of color-fetish associations perpetuated the ethnocentric narrative of a predominantly White BDSM subculture while othering people of color.¹⁰¹

Another hanky code presented more balanced ethnicity/racially-based color/fetish associations.¹⁰² This series adopts the color/fetish association of light blue as a background with a polka-dot pattern. The color of the polka-dots are attributed to ethnic/racial groups, and the roles are consistent with top/bottom designations. (Table 2b)

Unlike the series of white with black, brown, or yellow-striped color/fetish associations, this series of color/fetish associations neutralizes the cultural dominance of white men through the inclusion of a light blue with white dots handkerchief. However, in both cases, the reduction of ethnic/cultural identity to three or four colors is an over-simplification of the complexities of ethnic and racial identity. Additionally, while use of black to describe African American people and the use of brown to describe Latinx, Native Americans, Middle Eastern or Arabic people, and Southeast

¹⁰¹ Not to be confused with sexual dominance or subjugation on the basis of race or ethnicity, which exists in the form of “race play.”

¹⁰² “Gay Hanky Code,” *The Tampa Leather Club*, <http://tampaleatherclub.com/Hanky%20Codes.html>, accessed December 4, 2017.

Asian people by their respective groups, references to Asian people through the color yellow is culturally problematic.

Of the more recent hanky code decoders analyzed, there is an absence of some fetishes expressed through the use of the hanky code. For example, in June, 2000 *Boston Globe* reporter Yvonne Abraham noted that “a preference for unprotected intercourse has even entered the hanky code” identified as navy blue with white dots. This reflects yet another shift as a response to the changing attitudes toward unprotected sex in the queer male community.¹⁰³ Additional fetishes with little or no representation on hanky code decoder lists include “electro-play” (the use of an electronic stimulation device; a handkerchief with a black background with a yellow lightning bolt motif in a repeated pattern) and transman flagging (plaid handkerchiefs of any color combination).

A review of early decoder lists from the late 1970s, show a recurrence in the red color/fetish association as the first code listed. The ubiquity of red bandanas (with white paisley outline) throughout history has positioned them as “the classic color combination.”¹⁰⁴ This status most likely influenced its use as a queer sartorial code. Therefore, it is likely that the hanky code did begin as a sartorial coding with the use of red (and possibly dark or “navy” blue) first.

¹⁰³ Yvonne Abraham, “Unsafe Sex on Rise with AIDS Drugs, Many Gay Men See Less Danger,” *Boston Globe*, June 2000, A1.

¹⁰⁴ Susan Meller and Joost Elffers, *Textile Designs* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1991), 364.

ORIGIN STORIES

Despite research and exploration into the origins of the hanky code, and despite the assertions of many individuals familiar with hanky code lore, no origin story has been identified as the definitive one. The mythology of the hanky code's origins was centered around three stories: an article, a satirical invention of a shop clerk, and a nineteenth century photograph of a "stag dance" phenomenon from the Western frontier. While the details change, these three ideas have circulated and in various forms. One article provided a very specific account of the origins. In his article "Four Early Hanky Codes" for the Leather Archives & Museum newsletter, Bob Guenther noted that the invention of the hanky code was attributed to the owner of *Leather & Things*, a queer leather store in the Castro neighborhood of San Francisco. According to Guenther, the owner had the idea for an article he was writing for the New York-based queer magazine, *Queens Quarterly*. He needed to meet a deadline and had nothing to write about, and as a result created a story about the hanky code. The article and related hanky code decoder list was published in 1969 as a result, but was not immediately known to the queer male community. This particular reference combined the mythology of the publication article and the shop clerk origins. In it we see many of the satirical instances of different color/fetish associations, and prose-like entries, versus a succinct description of the fetish. These descriptions lend credibility to the idea of the hanky code's satirical origins.¹⁰⁵

The most recent Wikipedia entry reviewed for this thesis included the origin story of the nineteenth-century stag parties, where miners from Gold Rush-era San

¹⁰⁵ Bob Guenther, "Four Early Hanky Codes," *Leather Times: News From the Leather Archives & Museum* no. 23 (n.d.), 3-5.

Francisco used bandanas to indicate male/active and female/passive roles in square dancing (without citation). Wikipedia then cited a reference to the Village Voice article from the early 1970s where the journalist “joked that instead of simply wearing keys to indicate whether someone was a top or bottom, it would be more efficient to subtly announce their particular sexual focus by wearing different colored hankies.” Wikipedia also replicated the hanky code found in Larry Townsend’s *The Leatherman’s Handbook II* as an example.¹⁰⁶

It is possible that the bandana was selected for its existing history of use as an object of communication, from the privileged classes of the eighteenth century through the working classes of the nineteenth century, as well as their use to convey political messages. Its associations with masculine tropes such as cowboys, miners, and frontiersmen may have also been a contributing factor to its allure. But to identify the nineteenth-century stag parties as the precursor to the hanky code dismisses decades of queer sartorial coding that occurred in the first half of the twentieth century. As such, this origin story has been relegated to “contemporary gay folklore.”¹⁰⁷

CULTURAL REFERENCES

Documented use of the hanky code can be traced back to the early 1970s in San Francisco, California. According to Hal Fischer, a queer novelty store called The Trading Post sold red and blue bandanas and printed cards with what could be

¹⁰⁶ Wikipedia.org, “handkerchief code” entry, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Handkerchief_code#cite_note-2, accessed April 28, 2016.

¹⁰⁷ Susan Stryker and Jim Van Buskirk, *Gay by the Bay: A History of Queer Culture in the San Francisco Bay Area* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1996), 18.

described as a prototype of the hanky code.¹⁰⁸ In *Gay Semiotics* Hal Fischer identified hanky code bandanas and their related fetishes, noting “[t]he blue handkerchief is a signifier for anal intercourse... Red handkerchiefs signify behavior relating to anal/hand insertion, while black handkerchiefs indicate masochistic/sadistic tendencies. Yellow handkerchiefs represent sexual activities with the participants’ urine, or in gay jargon ‘water sports.’”¹⁰⁹

One of the earliest images discovered of hanky code flagging was in the photo book *Band of Bikers* by Scott Zieher. This book published a series of personal photographs from three gay biker events in 1972. Among the photographs is an image of one biker wearing a white t-shirt with the insignia of the Praetorians Motorcycle Club, denim jeans, and a red bandana in his back left pocket (Figure 7). While it is not clear whether the individual in the photograph was flagging or not, this may be one of the earliest images documenting hanky code flagging.¹¹⁰

References to the hanky code phenomenon have appeared in various contexts through its existence, and continues to do so. The ubiquity of back pocket bandanas during the height of the hanky code phenomenon in the mid-1970s eventually became visual shorthand for queer masculinity/maleness. These images were used as cover art for novelty books on gay culture and coming out. One example is *The Gay Picturebook* by Michael Emory.¹¹¹ In a *Honcho* magazine review, *The Gay Picturebook* is described as “one in an increasing number of books documenting what it means to be gay... a pictorial essay on various segments of gay life in America

¹⁰⁸ Fischer, 2015, 20.

¹⁰⁹ Fischer, 2015, 21.

¹¹⁰ Scott Zieher, *Band of Bikers* (Brooklyn: Powerhouse Books, 2010), n.p.

¹¹¹ Michael Emory, ed., *The Gay Picturebook* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1978), n.p.

today.”¹¹² In reference to the book’s hanky code inspired cover art, the reviewer drew comparisons to another well-known icon of masculinity: “The [Marlboro cigarettes] billboard...at the corner of Seventh Avenue and Christopher Street...[which] has for a long time symbolized a well-known part of gay life...[s]o too, have the colored handkerchiefs and keys...”¹¹³ The cover image of *Coming out in the Seventies* by Dennis Altman is a convergence of contemporary gay male sartorial codes: the earring, the keychain, and the back pocket bandana.¹¹⁴ Use of this imagery implicitly identifies queer men as the intended audience, despite the gender-neutrality or ambiguity of the title. The *First Official Gay Handbook* is a campy tome of all things gay (culturally speaking), and features a back pocket bandana in red as cover art (Figures 8a-c).¹¹⁵ These images exemplify how the hanky code phenomenon contributed to the semiotics of queer male sexuality. This statement emphasized the cultural institution which has become the hanky code by 1978 in New York City. By comparison, the author connects to representations of gay masculine identity on par with each other: the hanky code phenomenon, and the Marlboro Man. Like the hanky code, the Marlboro cigarettes billboard advertisement the West Village referenced in the *Honcho* book review of *The Gay Picturebook* became a coded invitation to a physical queer space and a veiled sexual reference: “Come to the Country. Man’s Country. Come!”¹¹⁶ *California Scene*, a queer magazine from Los Angeles, declared “[t]hose handkerchiefs tucked into back pockets have become the rage of ’75.”¹¹⁷

¹¹² George Mavety, ed., “The Gay Picturebook,” *Honcho*, vol. 1 no. 4, August 1978, 16.

¹¹³ Mavety, 1978, 16.

¹¹⁴ Dennis Altman, *Coming Out in the Seventies* (Boston: Alyson Publications, Inc., 1981), n.p.

¹¹⁵ Hudson Brown, *The First Official GAY Handbook* (Chicago: Turnbull & Willoughby, 1983), n.p.

¹¹⁶ Mavey, 1978, 16.

¹¹⁷ Jeff Buckley, ed., “Rover’s Column” *California Scene*, vol. 6 no. 2, July 1975- January 1976, 35.

Nolin Christensen, also known as Master C, recounted in his article “*Leather Life*” for Liberty Press: “In the 70’s and 80’s the hanky code was widely used by the general gay public. When I first went to bars, you never went out without a hanky in your pocket.”¹¹⁸

The hanky code phenomenon has also contributed to queer sexual vernacular. In addition to the term “hanky code” itself, the slang term “flagging” describes the act of the wearing of a bandana for the purpose of utilizing the hanky code. Hanky codes have also documented the continued use of queer sexual slang such as the designation of tops and bottoms as well as terms used to describe fetishes. The earliest definition of the hanky code in the *Urban Dictionary* was entered December 25, 2004: “a code used by the homosexual community to let others know what they’re ‘into.’” In May, 2006, a second entry narrowed down use of the hanky code “to identify sexual preferences within leather, or BDSM community. The color dictates your interest(s).” This entry also indicated “[w]hich pocket is important: left=top, right=bottom.”¹¹⁹ *Talk The Talk: The Slang of 65 American Subcultures* included an entry for the hanky code in its Gay, Lesbian, Transgendered, and Bisexual People section. Here, the hanky code is defined as a “somewhat dated way for gay men (and sometimes lesbians) to signal the kind of encounter they are interested in by wearing a handkerchief of a particular color on a particular side of the body.”¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Nolin Christensen, “Leather Life,” *Liberty Press* vol. 22 no. 2, October 2015, 23.

¹¹⁹ “hanky code,” *Urban Dictionary*, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=hanky+code>, accessed April 28, 2016.

¹²⁰ Luc Reid, *Talk The Talk: The Slang of 65 American Subcultures* (New York: Fall River Press, 2009), 143.

Photography as a medium for documentation, as well as for artistic expression has propelled queer male identity, and with it, whether intended or not, documented the practice of hanky code flagging. *Gay Day: The Golden Age of the Christopher Street Parade 1974-1983* is a 2006 publication of photographs from this era.

Photographer Hank O'Neal photographs a hanky code-inspired display consisting of a decoder list, trucker hats, leather bands (possibly collars), and cock rings dispersed in the foreground, with a leather hood suspended from above. Artistically, the image has a spiritual quality, as the display resembles an altar; an homage to the hanky code phenomenon (Figure 9). Artist and photographer Peter Hujar captures a moment between two men in *Christopher Street Pier #1*. Their similarities in appearance are offset by their dress: one only in white shorts and sneakers, the other in full black leather BDSM look. A yin-yang of cruising, they stand in a *contra posto* style pose, presenting their genital bulges to each other (Figure 10). A more direct presentation of hanky code flagging as subject matter is in Neil Malcolm Robert's *Untitled* image. Two men, photographed from the rear, in leather jackets and jeans are holding hands while flagging bandanas in their back pocket (Figure 11).

Hanky code in art was not limited to photography. The ONE Archives at the University of Southern California Libraries is in possession of a painting by an unknown artist of a back pocket bandana. The initials "GN" appear in the lower right hand corner, along with the number "'76". It is assumed that the letters are the initials of the artist, and the number is the year it was painted (1976). The flared silhouette of the leg is consistent with what was fashionable at the time, and the bulge under the center of the buttocks may be attributed to testicles, designating the gender of the

subject to be male. In addition to what appears to be a red bandana in the back left pocket, a partially obscured white ring on the left side of the figure's waist indicates that he may also be flagging with keys. Micha Ramaker's examination of Tom of Finland's art in *Dirty Pictures: Tom of Finland, Masculinity, and Homosexuality* analyzed the characters in illustrations and drawings of Touko Laaksonen (known as Tom of Finland). This analysis of appearance included the dress of the subjects in his drawings. In one drawing, Ramaker described the clothing of a hitchhiker and a biker, noting "the use of symbols drawn from a range of disparate codes" and notes that "[i]n his back pocket he has stuffed a handkerchief. The handkerchief rose to prominence as a part of gay semiotics in the seventies, its color and position indicating specific sexual preferences." This, along with other visual cues, informs the viewer of the subject's queer identification and fetishistic proclivities. Revealing shorts, biker boots, earring, necklace with bottle of chemical inhalant, wrist band, handcuffs hanging from his belt loop (reminiscent of coding with keys) and bamboo stick in his boot serve to send subtle and obvious signals about the subject (Figure 12).¹²¹

Additional images of the hanky code in queer BDSM culture present this layered signaling. In addition to describing his experience and knowledge of the hanky code in *BIKER BAR*, Thom Magister included two illustrations depicting the hanky code. In one illustration a line-up of six male figures are sitting at the bar facing away from the viewer all of whom were flagging. Affixed on the wall behind the bar is a hanky code poster. In another image, two figures, both flagging, one showing interest in the other by reaching out to the rear of the other. Thom emphasized their roles as

¹²¹ Micha Ramaker, *Dirty Pictures: Tom of Finland, Masculinity, and Homosexuality* (New York City: Stonewall Editions, 2000), 145.

bottoms through two ways: one figure flags right back pocket, but also has his keys hanging from a right side of his jeans, and also has an arm band around his right bicep. The other figure has multiple bandanas hanging from his right back pocket, illustrating Magister's point of fluidity where "[j]ust because the harnessed dude is sporting an arm band, keys, and hanky on the right doesn't mean he can't appreciate a sweet butt."¹²²

The hanky code has continued to be a source of inspiration and artistic expression, much like it had been during the height of the phenomenon's popularity. Contemporary queer artists such as Vincent Chevalier and Michael Petry celebrate queer male sexuality, desire, and identity. Both artists have referenced the hanky code in their work as representational aspects of the queer male experience. Both artists incorporate the performative nature of the hanky code phenomenon in their work while simultaneously exploring issues of sexuality and sexual identity. In *Blank Hanky, Bottom Right*, Chevalier had the outline of a bandana in a back pocket tattooed to his right buttock. The color of the bandana is filled in according to his partner(s)'s sexual interests.¹²³ (Figures 13a-b) Petry's installation *The Milky Way and Other Fairy Tales* included leather hides hung on the wall that were dyed according to colors from the hanky code with pearls sewn onto them representing the "trajectories of actual ejaculations."¹²⁴ (Figure 14)

¹²² Magister, 2013, 27.

¹²³ Mark Ambrose Harris, "From hanky tattoos to HIV disclosures, artist Vincent Chevalier cracks the queer codes," *Nightlife*, November 12, 2011, <http://www.nightlife.ca/2011/11/12/hanky-tattoos-hiv-disclosures-artist-vincent-chevalier-cracks-queer-codes>, accessed November 1, 2018.

¹²⁴ Caroline Smith, "Hide and Seek with Rebels: Tracing Contemporary Queer Art in Cracks and Rips," *Wasafiri* vol. 22 no. 1, (March 2007): 34-35.

References to the hanky code were also found in literary and journalistic works. In Andrew Holleran's 1978 novel *Dancer From The Dance* one of the lead characters describes "the various meanings of the outfits going by: the red handkerchief in the left pocket (fist-fucker), or right pocket (fist-fuckee), the yellow handkerchief (piss)..."¹²⁵ In Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City*, Michael introduces a story by "setting the stage", introducing himself as "Maharishi Mahesh Mouse" bringing "the Keys to Kingdom of Folsom Street. The Holy Red Bandana That Sitteth on the Left Hand of the Levi's..."¹²⁶ In *The Sexual Outlaw*, John Rechy described the wearing of "color-print handkerchiefs, worn on this or that side...with this or that degree of exposure, are messages of varying degrees of dominance or passivity (Confusion often results because these signals change from place to place)." ¹²⁷ Recounting a Los Angeles police sting, they "would obtain important crime-fighting equipment, including: '4 bleached Levi's – tight-fitting; 4 bandanas, 2 red, 2 blue'; also 'boots, rough, dirty... [a] motorcycle hat; studded Levi's, jacket.'" ¹²⁸ Writings or advertisements of particular fetishes or the hanky code itself have featured accompanying illustrations in books, magazines, and newsletters/zines. (Figures 15a-c, 16a-b)

References to the hanky code can also be found in film and television. In William Friedkin's 1980 movie *Cruising*, an undercover policeman investigates a series of murders occurring in New York City's queer BDSM subculture. Throughout the film the audience witnesses his internal struggles with sexuality, identity, and

¹²⁵ Andrew Holleran, *Dancer From The Dance* (New York: HarperCollins, 1978), 178.

¹²⁶ Armistead Maupin, *Tales From the City* (New York: HarperCollins, 1978), 143.

¹²⁷ John Rechy, *The Sexual Outlaw: A Documentary* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1977), 256.

¹²⁸ Rechy, 1977, 267.

prejudice as he is consumed with the case assigned to him. Besides other instances, the following four scenes exemplify the use of hanky code imagery in the film (Figures 17a-d):

1. The main character Steve Burns walks into a gay shop and notices an array of bandanas hanging from a display. He asks the clerk about their significance, and the clerk responds by describing color fetish associations consistent with the hanky code.
2. Steve Burns, on undercover assignment at a leather bar, is approached by a bar patron, based on Steve's flagging. Steve rejects the patron, indicating that he isn't interested, and the patron immediately responds to Steve's mixed messaging.
3. A leather bar patron has a red bandana tied around his arm and will eventually perform the fetish he is flagging.
4. At a leather bar, the camera pans across the mid-sections of patrons dancing where at least one patron is wearing a brown bandana in his back pocket.

In D.A. Miller's revisited film review for *Film Quarterly*, Miller references the use of bandanas invoking the hanky code when describing the "fondness" of the "anal caress" of the film's focus on various body parts for the purposes of sexual experimentation, "attested both by the many red and blue handkerchiefs protruding from back pockets..."¹²⁹ The use of bandanas in the film extended beyond hanky code

¹²⁹ D.A. Miller, "Second Time Around: Cruising," *Film Quarterly*. vol. 61 no. 2 (Winter 2007): 71, University of California Press / JSTOR, accessed November 14, 2014.

flagging. They are doused with chemicals and used as inhalants, and a bandana is also used in a later scene to wipe the victim's blood from the hands of the murderer.

There is strong evidence of the hanky code's connection to satire. According to Guy Baldwin and Gayle Rubin, the inclusion of additional colors to represent distinct fetishes began more as a prank-like social experiment. The mythology indicates that at least one (or two) store clerks from a sex/BDSM novelty store (The Trading Post and The Pleasure Chest have been named) decided to add additional colors to represent other fetishes beyond the dark blue and red bandanas that were being used at the time to signal sexual availability for intercourse (dark blue) and fisting (red) and see "how far it would go."¹³⁰ Many early hanky codes have tongue-in-cheek references to fetishes, even far-fetched references which appear to have little to do with sexual fetishization or sexuality in general. This has resulted in an abundance of examples which illustrate absurdist perspectives of the hanky code. (Figures 18a-b)

Much of the primary source material reviewed emphasized the parodic nature of the hanky code. A hanky code from 1975 illustrated the color puce as someone who "wants discussion of pre-Minoan Art." The Lunatic Fringe, a newsletter published by a lesbian BDSM group creates parodies of the hanky code for the entertainment of its readers in April 1990 as the "April Fool's" edition. It was subject to many parodies and jokes in at least two other April editions. More recently, The Advocate published a "revised version with all-new relevance," on its website. It included illustrations of bandanas with new design motifs embedded in the paisley associated with the revised fetishes. This consisted of repurposing color/fetish associations that reference

¹³⁰ Conversation with Gayle Rubin, September 6, 2014, and Guy Baldwin, June 23, 2016.

contemporary topics in queer culture, such as the use of pharmaceuticals (Turn Blue: Currently Using Viagra and Teal me no lies: Team Truvada), sexting, or the practice of sending text messages with sexual content (Hexidecimal Gray), and the gay for pay phenomenon, which consists of straight-identified men who perform sexual acts with other men for compensation, usually through pornography or prostitution (Palm Grease Green).¹³¹ (Figures 19a-d)

The comedy sketch television show “In Living Color” (1990-1994) included a parody series called “Men on...” where two flamboyantly dressed effeminate men discussed a contemporary cultural topics (via their derisive catchphrase) “from a male point of view.” One episode of “Men on Football” dissected the homoerotic components of professional football regulations and practices with sexual innuendo and double-entendres. As one character posited: “Speaking of flags...we all know what a red flag in the right pocket means, but what does a yellow flag in the left pocket mean?” to which the other character responded “Oh, I think those are the wide receivers.”¹³²

The first music video for the song “Relax” by the British New Wave group Frankie Goes to Hollywood was directed by Bernard Rose and depicted a bacchanal-style gathering of leathermen.¹³³ The video did not air on the American music television channel MTV and on the British broadcast network channel BBC due to

¹³¹ Christopher Harrity, “The New Hanky Code.” *Advocate Health*, April 22, 2015, accessed July 23, 2015. <http://www.advocate.com/comedy/2015/04/22/new-hanky-code#slide-0>

¹³² “Men on Football,” *In Living Color*, aired January 26, 1992, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2OKwRsnWO84>, accessed November 16, 2017.

¹³³ “Relax,” by Frankie goes to Hollywood, *Wikipedia.org*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frankie_Goes_to_Hollywood#cite_note-8, accessed August 26, 2015.

what was perceived at the time as adult themes and content.¹³⁴ At certain points throughout the video, at least one person is flagging a red bandana in his left pocket. It is unclear whether the director was aware of the significance of bandanas in the back pockets of leathermen. Other more recent references to the hanky code are included in a music video for Brendan Maclean’s song “House of Air” and the biographical film “Tom of Finland” (2017). In the film, bandanas hang from a display in a leather shop within a leather bar, similarly to the scene in *Cruising*. The video for House of Air was inspired by Fischer’s *Gay Semiotics*.¹³⁵

A musical reference to the hanky code includes the song “Hanky Code” by Canadian musical artist Peaches (2006). In “Hanky Code”, Peaches warns the listener to “better know your hanky code before you go and shoot your load.” A selection of colors and their respective associations are highlighted in the song: “...wearing gold lamé, you better work out all day...wearing black on the right, you know you’re gonna hurt tonight...gray, you’re gonna be tied up...orange on the right means not tonight, but uh-oh, on the left means anything goes” “uncut: brown lace, light blue: use your face, olive tone: you love a man in uniform”¹³⁶

Just as they did in the 1970s, queer retail establishments, in particular those catering to a BDSM clientele, have included the sale of bandanas for the purpose of hanky code flagging. Shops such as Mr. S. Leather in San Francisco and LEATHER64TEN in Chicago have displayed bandanas with an accompanying

¹³⁴ “Relax” by Frankie Goes to Hollywood, *Songfacts.com*, <http://www.songfacts.com/detail.php?id=399>, accessed August 26, 2015.

¹³⁵ “House of Air” by Brendan Maclean, directed by Brian and Karl, <https://vimeo.com/200672866>, accessed March 10, 2017.

¹³⁶ Peaches, “Hanky Code,” (London: XL Recordings, 2006).

decoder list nearby, available as an in-store reference guide. (Figures 20a-b)

Additionally, multiple vendors at BDSM events such as the annual International Mr. Leather (IML) contest and conference in Chicago provide bandanas for sale, and will include bandanas for lesser known fetishes, or fetishes that do not appear on many decoder lists. (Figure 21) Queer BDSM or “leather” bars have also revived hanky code theme nights. Prior to the internet, flyers, pins, and handkerchiefs advertised and promoted hanky code inspired parties. (Figures 22a-b) Since then, advertisements for hanky code parties have appeared on social media. (Figures 23a-b) Brett Schmidt, a freelance graphic designer designed the ad campaign for the New York City Eagle’s two-for-one drinks theme night, “Hanky Tuesdays.” He chose the colors based a “feasible sexual connection that the audience could believe.” Schmidt indicated that the image was created in February 2015, and was meant to be used for Folsom East, the New York City version of the San Francisco-based BDSM event, the Folsom Street Fair. The ad series consisted of the same image of two men flagging, but with changing hanky code colors. This, according to Schmidt, “changes the story” of the image, establishing a connection between the viewer and the image.¹³⁷

Public Health researchers published an essay of the feasibility and receptiveness of the use of color-coded wristbands during sex parties in order to communicate condom use preference, sexual role/activity preferences, and HIV status. Low lighting, loud music, and the discouragement of men from speaking have prompted an exploration of non-verbal communication and the negotiation of sex among men at these gatherings. The researchers indicated that “perhaps there’s

¹³⁷ Conversation with Brett Schmidt, July 14, 2015.

something to be gleaned from the hanky code for implementation at sex parties.” The paper suggests taking cues from the hanky code by including the identification of sexual roles (top, bottom, versatile) through the wearing of the wristband on a particular arm (left, right, both).¹³⁸

Of particular note is Brandon Gellis’s comparison of the hanky code in “mimic[ing] natural mating displays of some firefly species, whereby the female [Phontinus] fireflies flaunt colored patterns to attract specific mates.” Through this comparison he presents the hanky code as “language and symbols essential to the success of any super organismic (complex) system” consistent with the research of Selin Kesebir.¹³⁹

Contemporary references of the hanky code have surfaced in new and social media including Wikipedia, Urban Dictionary, Slate, and The Huffington Post. Social media apps geared toward queer men such as Grindr have been seen as the “biggest change in gay hookups since the hanky code.”¹⁴⁰

Given the hanky code’s early documented history with satire, there is a strong possibility that the origin story of the satirical addition of colors beyond red and navy blue to represent other fetishes may be what actually happened. However far-fetched or silly some color/fetish associations were, other color-fetish associations made narrative sense, and did provide an opportunity for individuals to covertly advertise their fetishes in a non-satirical way. Flagging red, yellow, navy, black, and grey

¹³⁸ Christian Grov, Jackeline Cruz, Jeffrey T. Parsons, “Men Who Have Sex with Men’s Attitudes Toward Using Color-Coded Wristbands to Facilitate Sexual Communication at Sex Parties,” *Journal of Sex Research and Social Policy*. New York: Springer, January 24, 2014. P. 12, 17.

¹³⁹ Brandon S. Gellis, “Nature & Spirit: A Digital Lens of Gay-Male Culture,” *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture*. Vol. 16, No. 1, February 9, 2017. p4.

¹⁴⁰ Matt Kapp, “Grindr: Welcome to the World’s Biggest, Scariest Gay Bar,” *Vanityfair.com*, May 27, 2011, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2011/05/grindr-201105>, accessed March 4, 2018.

present as serious fetishes, and are typically not used in a tongue-in-cheek way. Thom Magister noted that invention of “assigning obscure tints to a myriad of special interests were basically jokes, put-ons for tourists.”¹⁴¹

In both descriptions of Figure 4b, Hal Fischer also provided a disclaimer for additional uses of bandanas, noting that they are “commonly used in the treatment of nasal congestion” and “are also employed in the treatment of nasal discharge”. This additional information on the application of bandana uses were most likely added for humor.¹⁴²

QUEER DRESS

In the 1970s, a masculine-presenting, queer male identity formed among bikers, military, cowboys, police, and other blue-collar professions dominated by men. Each of these archetypes and associated form of dress contributed significantly to visible, gay identities. As they did for their heterosexual counterparts, these archetypes represented virility and an unapologetic sexuality, which as a queer-identified male, was liberating. This also presented dress as a way to advertise sexuality that included sexual availability. In the biography of Robert Mapplethorpe, Arthur Danto wrote, “[w]e communicate through our costumes, as much through black lace as black leather, as much through jockstraps as through flannel nighties.”¹⁴³ Such is the case

¹⁴¹ Magister, 2013, 25.

¹⁴² Fischer, 2015, 8-9.

¹⁴³ Arthur C. Danto, *Playing With the Edge: The Photographic Achievement of Robert Mapplethorpe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 95.

with the hanky code, as it evolved from cover to overt sartorial coding, from subcultural dress phenomenon to mainstream fashion inspiration.

The Versace Autumn/Winter 2014/2015 menswear collection featured sleeveless shirts, underwear, and handkerchiefs with a reinterpreted bandana motif consisting of the paisley decoration integrated with Versace branding elements such as the “Medusa” image, the Greek key pattern, and the brand logo. Additionally paired with these items were leather jackets, pants, or chaps. Styled with chaps worn over underwear, and bandanas in back pockets, the reference to queer BDSM and biker culture was apparent (Figures 24a-d). Jessica Michault of NowFashion.com indicates that the collection was “inspired by cowboys and bikers,” two culturally significant gay hyper-masculine archetypes. Donatella Versace is quoted as saying that ““this collection is dedicated to all the men who want to feel free.””¹⁴⁴ Tim Blanks of Style.com identified this collection as “a paeon to the biker as the new cowboy,” the most memorable looks were “a handful of boys who were basically bare-assed in chaps, bar the skimpy, hungry-bummed bandana-printed briefs they sported,” and that part of the collection “looked like showboys from a Vegas review inspired by Kenneth Anger’s underground biker classic *Scorpio Rising*.”¹⁴⁵

Although Versace does not explicitly cite the hanky code as inspiration, it is clear that biker culture influenced this collection, and two archetypes found in gay culture are a central theme of the collection. Alexander Fury’s review of the collection was “inspired by the Village People idea that bikers are the new John Wayne” and

¹⁴⁴ Jessica Michault, “Versace Menswear Fall Winter 2014 Milan.” *NowFashion.com*, January 11, 2014, <http://nowfashion.com/versace-menswear-fall-winter-2014-milan-5650>, accessed July 23, 2015.

¹⁴⁵ Tim Blanks, “Review – Versace Fall 2014 Menswear,” *Style.com*, January 14, 2014, <http://www.style.com/fashion-shows/fall-2014-menswear/versace>, accessed July 23, 2015.

‘[t]here’s even a nod to the ‘hanky code’ in vibrant bandanna-prints.’¹⁴⁶ Her brother Gianni, who started the design house and with whom she had a very close relationship, was openly gay, and could have been an influence in her inspiration. The brand’s “medusa head” is imbedded in the paisley design of the bandana-style print of the shirts and underwear, as well as the actual bandanas. The show closes with the models walking to “Do You Wanna Funk” by Sylvester, an openly gay/genderqueer disco singer and performer.

Prior to this upward influence in high fashion, the hanky code inspired and influenced queer fashion of individuals who communicate their fetishes in a variety of ways beyond the use of a bandana, but still within the defined color structure of the hanky code. T-shirts convey fetishes by integrating hanky code colors, sometimes with an additional explicit or implicit graphic to represent the fetish (Figures 25a-b). Certain apparel brands market to a segment of the gay male population interested in sexually suggestive and provocative design. Other companies produce and/or sell items referencing the hanky code including color-coded shoelaces, socks, and suspenders. Individuals interested in flagging may choose to do so with these items incorporated into their look.

The evolution of the hanky code took a significant turn in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Manufacturers of fetish apparel and accessories (also known as fetishwear) produced black leather products (the mainstay material) accented with colored leather trim. In the 1997 cover story article of the hanky code in *Drummer*

¹⁴⁶ Alexander Fury, “Donatella Versace: ‘I Love Being Surrounded by Gorgeous Gus’,” *Independent*, January 12, 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/fashion/features/donatella-versace-i-love-being-surrounded-by-gorgeous-guys-9053695.html>, accessed July 23, 2015.

magazine, Robert Davolt noted that “the basic color code now appears on accessories from armbands, cockrings, [and] shoulder straps” and that “[r]ed, blue, or yellow pin stripes can even be found running down the thighs of custom-made leather pants.”¹⁴⁷ Nasty Pig was one such company. Located in New York City, the company began exclusively selling fetishwear for queer men in 2004. Since then, they have branched out into the apparel market, creating fetishwear-inspired streetwear. The Nasty Pig aesthetic is unapologetically queer, male, and sexual. Nasty Pig founder and CEO David Lauderstein confirmed that color-accented leather items created by Nasty Pig were inspired by the hanky code.¹⁴⁸ Other fetishwear brands such as Mr.S Leather, Cell Block 13, and Full Kit Leather offer leather, synthetic leather, neoprene, and rubber items accented with colors found in the hanky code, and are consistently worn by individuals flagging that color’s associated fetish. The most reproduced colors accenting black fetishwear are typically red, blue, and yellow, among others, to accent arm bands, wrist bands, harnesses, and chaps. The message continues to be reinforced through other sartorial choices including socks, athletic supporters (commonly known as jock straps), shoelaces, and t-shirts. Black boots, in particular Dr. Marten’s, along with Fred Perry polo shirts, have a shared history of identity coding with skinheads, a European-based subculture whose style of dress was coopted by neo-Nazi followers in the 1990s. A queer skinhead may simultaneously communicate these intersecting subcultural affiliations, as use of specific items of clothing (boots, shirt, suspenders) communicate skinhead affiliation but colors such as red or yellow are integrated for the purposes of fetish flagging consistent with the hanky code.

¹⁴⁷ Davolt, 1997, 21.

¹⁴⁸ Conversation with David Lauderstein, May 30, 2015.

Items such as laces, colored trim on black leather clothing items and accessories, reinforce the pre-existing hanky code flagging of the bandana. Shaun Cole alluded to this type of flagging in an analysis of clothing in gay pornography: “[Al] Parker is wearing a red jockstrap and when [Sky] Dawson appears he is wearing a yellow jockstrap. The colors could be read as a reference to the hanky code, developed by gay men to indicate interest in particular sexual activities.”¹⁴⁹ However, it is not likely that either actor was flagging or invoking the hanky code phenomenon, as neither of the fetishes associated with those colors were featured in the film. However, Cole’s foreshadowing the presence of an “oily rag, mirroring the hanky code and thus setting up the expectation that he will initially take the active role in the forthcoming sexual activity” exemplifies the connection between role presentation, queer masculinity, and identity.¹⁵⁰

QUEER IDENTITY PRESENTATION AND FORMATION

The use of the bandana as the sartorial code of choice maybe traced to the fashions of the late 1960s. The sexual revolution of 1960s which continued through the 1970s, along with the gay rights movement, became a reclamation of identity, which included sexuality. Gellis references the adoption of the hanky code as a “counterculture behavior” along with cross-gender dressing (commonly known as “drag”) and “coopting dual-meaning lexicon” as ways of coded communication through appearance and behavior.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ Shaun Cole, “Costume or Dress? The Use of Clothing in the Gay Pornography of Jim French’s Colt Studio,” *Fashion Theory*, vol. 18 no 2. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, PLC, 2014), 140.

¹⁵⁰ Cole, 2014, 140.

¹⁵¹ Gellis, 2017, 3.

The use of hanky code flagging and other queer sartorial coding has also been documented and memorialized in biographies of queer men. In addition to the references in the biographies of Harry Hay and Samuel Stewart, Allen Windsor's recollections and ruminations of his gay sexual experiences in Times Square in *Cruising the Deuce: In Movie Houses on 42nd Street, Times Square, and Greenwich Village in the 1940s to 1980s* described his unfamiliarity with queer language and behaviors while cruising. According to Windsor, he "was told that a certain color hanky meant you were passive, another that you were active, but...couldn't find any key as to which was which."¹⁵²

Patricia Morrisroe provided a description of the sartorial trappings of the 1970s New York City gay leather scene in her biography of the fine art photographer Robert Mapplethorpe: "In addition to black motorcycle jackets or flannel shirts and work boots, they wore tight T-shirts, and button-fly Levi's with one button undone; they dangled keys and handkerchiefs from their jeans pockets as an indication of which sexual acts they preferred, and which sexual positions."¹⁵³ Of Mapplethorpe's own flagging, Morrisroe noted that "[h]e didn't dangle just one colored handkerchief from his pocket; he had sewn together at least half a dozen so that he advertised a rainbow of sexual preferences."¹⁵⁴ His flagging practice became part craft and part compulsion, where his identity as an artist intersected with his identity as a BDSM practitioner.

Flagging also allowed participants to negotiate with little or no conversation about what men were interested in when out cruising. In a scenario where queer men

¹⁵² Allen Windsor, *Cruising the Deuce: In Movie Houses on 42nd Street, Times Square, and Greenwich Village in the 1940s to 1980s* (New York: chelCPress, 2005), 36.

¹⁵³ Patricia Morrisroe, *Mapplethorpe: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1995), 144.

¹⁵⁴ Morrisroe, 1995, 145.

were unable to have conversations about sexual interests, fetishes, and limits, flagging was a tool. Interviewed for *A Walking Tour of South of Market in the 1970s*, Tom Drew, a customer of the Boot Camp, a sex club in San Francisco from 1971 to 1985, said of the Boot Camp that sexual practices weren't as "conducive to [negotiation] as meeting someone in a leather bar and going home with them, and talking about what you wanted to do, or using the hanky code to tell people what you wanted to do. [In other words, the ability of] [u]sing handkerchief colors to tell them."¹⁵⁵

The hanky code, like other cultural phenomena, has tangible and intangible components. Despite the ephemeral nature of hanky code related objects such as decoders and even the bandanas themselves, early photographs created a visual cultural record which documented the phenomenon. These photographs documented the intangible, performative aspect of the hanky code, either implicitly or explicitly, as works of art as and/or as documentary photography. Conversely, the act of wearing the bandana(s) to invoke the hanky code, or "flagging", the act of cruising, and the sexual act are ephemeral states. Although there are predetermined roles for each sexual act in the hanky code, cruising itself takes the form of an active or receptive search. While the argument can be made that flagging itself is active, certain cruising behaviors could be considered active, such as walking or wandering, and passive, such as standing in place. The act of cruising itself is a cultural construct tied to the core of queer male sexual identity. In *Gay Macho: The Life and Death of the Homosexual Clone*, Martin Levine emphasized the communication of queer attraction and desire through clothing. According to Levine, accessories such as key chains and bandanas

¹⁵⁵ Eric Rofes, *A Walking Tour of South of Market in the 1970s* (Arcata: Humboldt State University, 2005), 10.

“communicated hotness.” He noted the synchronous appeal of these items as “working-class accessories, but also signaled sexual interest and predilection.”¹⁵⁶

Analyzing many early hanky codes revealed that the red color-fetish association was listed first. This is most likely that use of the red bandana as a sexual signifier pre-dates the concept of the hanky code. In *Gay Semiotics* Fischer noted that “[t]he red and blue handkerchiefs and their significance were in existence” prior to the assignment of colors to other fetishes reinforces this idea.¹⁵⁷ Specifically, the initial use of a red bandana as a sexual signifier for brachioproctical insertion, or “fisting” indicates that this was a sexual practice of interest for many BDSM practitioners who were looking to connect with other individuals interested in the same practice. It is likely that the significance of the color red was initially inconsequential, given that bandanas were typically known to be red because of its dye history. However, as sartorial practice evolved to become the hanky code, the color took on a greater significance and connectedness to the fetish.

The first thing of note is its nomenclature. A bandana is a type of handkerchief, and while there is evidence of the phenomenon being identified as the “bandana color code”, the hanky code was probably more palatable as a descriptor. The term “hanky code” not only refers to the list of color/fetish/role associations, but has also been used to describe the phenomenon as a whole. One “flags” when wearing bandanas (or colors in reference to the hanky code) for the purposes of advertising sexual fetishes, behaviors, or practices. “Hanky code” becomes an umbrella term used to identify the

¹⁵⁶ Martin P. Levine, *Gay Macho: The Life and Death of the Homosexual Clone* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 66.

¹⁵⁷ Fisher, 2015, 20.

overall phenomenon itself. The word “flagging” is adopted as a direct result of the hanky code, while use of “cruising,” “top,” bottom,” and “versatile” were more commonplace because of the hanky code. Don Kulick’s article on queer linguistics noted inclusion of the hanky code as non-verbal communication as well as the usage of contemporary slang coopted by the queer community provides significant information on how language is used to communicate queer male desire, but also the information on the constructs of identity presentation.¹⁵⁸

Prolific use of the hanky code beginning in the mid-1970s inspired a visual legacy which became associated with queer male identity. Flagging during events such as gay marches and parades as evidenced by photography from the time reinforced the idea of the hanky code as something more than sartorial coding. The practice of flagging during queer events continues today, most notably at kink fairs/events. (Figure 26a-d) Photography and illustrations graced the cover of books and magazines in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as well as in more recent examples. (Figures 27a-c) The hanky code became an inherent part of the BDSM community. In addition to publishing hanky codes in queer media such as newsletters, discussions about the hanky code were included in BDSM sexuality workshops. In an article for *The Calendar*, a San Antonio queer publication, Lewis Crump of the Tejas Motorcycle Club led a discussion on the “difference between heterosexual and homosexual [BD]S&M” and “explained the hanky code once and for all.”¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ Don Kulick, “Gay and Lesbian Language” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Annual Reviews, vol. 29 (2000): 257.

¹⁵⁹ Mark Smith, “Pleasure in Pain? Maybe” *The Calendar* vol. 5 no. 2. (February 4-16, 1984) from the Digital Collections of the University of Texas at San Antonio, <https://server16018-contentdm-oclc-org.fscproxy.framingham.edu/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/p16018coll7&CISOPTR=1090&REC=4>, accessed February 12, 2018.

While other signifiers have since been created, adopted, adapted, or used to visually represent the various LGBTQ communities such as pride flags, the hanky code phenomenon continued to represent queer masculinity through the BDSM subculture on a more individual level. Users of social media apps catered to queer users have incorporated hanky code vernacular in personal profiles through a profile image and description. Here, an individual may either provide an image where they are flagging, or include language in their profile. The creation and development of online social networking and dating apps for queer communities allowed for sexual connections without the need to meet in public spaces, rendering the need for gay semiotics as unnecessary. Profiles can be created with flexibility for privacy and anonymity. However, users can also take advantage of profile features such as image uploads, text boxes, and pull-down menus to craft, form, and present an identity consistent with the search for sexual encounter. This has included the use of hanky code as a form of online flagging. This reinforces the relevance of a phenomenon like the hanky code not only to readily express fetishes in a succinct way, but also provides a platform for queer identity formation and expression. (Figures 28a-c)

Historically, bandanas have been associated with masculinity and were thus given “a special place in masculine affections” as a result of their associations with cowboys.¹⁶⁰ In the 1970s, certain gay male subcultures presented more masculine than feminine, to the point that it can be considered hyper-masculine, or “more masculine than straight men.” This included the use of leather, denim, boots, wearing short hair, and growing mustaches. In many instances this is seen as a rejection of feminine or

¹⁶⁰ Meller and Joost, 1991, 364.

androgynous presentations of fashion in the 1970s, which coincided with a more visible queer culture. However, this can also be seen as a reclamation of masculinity through a queer lens.¹⁶¹ Researchers Francisco Surace and Heidi Levitt described hanky code flagging as part of “leathermen” (a term used to describe male presenting members of the BDSM community) identity by the placement of “handkerchiefs or bandanas in back pockets...to signal sexual role and practice preferences where different colors signify desired sexual practices, and where pocket placement signifies top, bottom, or versatile positions” and through its use of “symbolic communication...can acquire emotional significance through different sexual rites and can mark the process of becoming a leatherman.”¹⁶² In *The Dictionary of Scene-Friendly Terms*, Jack Rinella wrote that “though you will find various long lists of hanky code colors, in actuality only a few colors were ever used with any regularity.” Furthermore, Rinella indicated the “use of handkerchiefs, keys, or armbands...has generally fallen out of favor, except perhaps, among the more traditional of Leathermen.”¹⁶³

The practice of hanky code flagging predominately exercised by masculine presenting queer men (and women), has perpetuated these associations. Despite these associations, queer identities outside of traditional expressions of masculinity and maleness have included hanky code flagging as expression of these identities. The bandana itself as an object has no gender, and historically, used by both men and

¹⁶¹ Crane, 2000, 194.

¹⁶² Francisco I. Surace, and Heidi M. Levitt, *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer: Bear and Leather Subcultures*, vol. 13 of *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences 2nd Edition* (Oxford: Elsevier, 2015), 888.

¹⁶³ Rinella, 2008, 59.

women. A more formalized adoption and adaptation of the hanky code occurred within the lesbian BDSM community when SAMOIS, a female-centered BDSM social group created, printed and distributed a separate lesbian hanky code to their membership with newsletters in 1978. In 1979 SAMOIS published *What Color is your Handkerchief: a lesbian s/m sexuality reader*, which included a glossary of fetish terminology and a lesbian hanky code list (Figures 29a-c).¹⁶⁴ Since then, a lesbian hanky code has existed alongside the original hanky code, which had been intended for queer men. Therefore, during a time when women sought equality and sexual freedom, the lesbian hanky code was a logical evolution. Eventually, an extended hanky code appeared and included fetish-color associations from both the original hanky code and the lesbian hanky code. Lesbians who present feminine appearance (known as “femmes”) have found creative ways of integrating bandanas into their dress. (Figures 30a-b) Female to male transition, or transgender men (“trans men”) have also adapted a form of hanky code flagging by using a swatch of plaid fabric as a handkerchief, tucked into a back pocket. (Figure 31)

Another subculture making use of hanky code flagging is the “Pup” subculture. Pups are predominately queer men in the BDSM subculture who take on behavioral characteristics of canines. In addition to behavior, Pups are known for a particular type of fetish dress which includes, but is not limited to: a harness, a stylized dog mask (made from leather, rubber, or neoprene), a collar, gloves, knee pads, and a tail attachment, and Pup-centric t-shirts. As a more recently identified fetish subgroup, Pup dress includes non-traditional materials such as neoprene as well as a wide range

¹⁶⁴ SAMOIS (ed.), *What Color is your Handkerchief: A Lesbian S/M Sexuality Reader* (Berkeley: Samois, 1979), 36.

of colors, much of which can be used for hanky code flagging. As a fetish group, Pups have gained much visibility in the BDSM subculture in the last five to eight years, and the availability of Pup dress is evidence of this. Hanky code flagging with traditional bandanas has also been integrated into Pup dress, and handkerchiefs representing Pup identity exist. (Figure 32). Although Pups engage in traditional hanky code flagging with rear pocket placement, bandanas and handkerchiefs are also worn around the neck, consistent with how pet dogs are dressed with bandanas. This break from traditional flagging placement either represents flexibility in fetishes, or an assumption that most Pups typically prefer one role. Table 3 presents Pup-specific handkerchiefs for pup identity/fetish flagging. Handkerchiefs with other motifs such as a fire hydrant do not necessarily present an advertisement for a sexual encounter, as much as it is more for self-identification. (Table 3).

Eventually the heterosexual BDSM community adopted the hanky code phenomenon and the practice of flagging.¹⁶⁵ Susan Kaiser noted that the “straight community did not develop the same kind of complex coding system,” despite many of the overlapping fetishes that are practiced by both heterosexual and homosexual/queer BDSM practitioners.¹⁶⁶

The bandana’s current resurgence as a fashion object and its association with the hanky code has prompted a complexity of the innocuous and the subversive as it has the capacity to communicate two aspects of identity: an identity of sexual

¹⁶⁵ Michele Buchanan, “Leather Is Thicker Than Blood: Identity Formation among Organized SM Practitioners in New York City” (New York: The New School University, unpublished dissertation, 2003), 59-60.

¹⁶⁶ Kaiser, 2012, 160.

presentation and the identity of fashion participant.¹⁶⁷ Reilly and Saethre's essay provided anecdotal information through interviews and examined contemporary uses of the hanky code, and perceptions of the hanky code by a new generation of gay men, in particular the intersectionality of bandanas as fashion objects by wearers with an awareness of the hanky code.¹⁶⁸ Intent and context become important determining factors for use by the informed. The wearer determines its use as a fashion object, a utilitarian textile, or as a sartorial signifier. As Robert Davolt concluded in his article, "The hanky code does not constitute an iron-clad contract any more than keys hanging right or left...For most, except the most fundamentalist extremists, it is a statement of desire, the beginning of a conversation."¹⁶⁹ This appears to be most apparent with younger members of the queer community. As Hammack and Cohler wrote, "[a]s young people explore their sexuality and learn about sexual cultures, they develop an individual sense of sexuality within the context of a larger cultural social system."¹⁷⁰

Susan Bean's article on bandanas is the earliest academic reference to the hanky code researched for this thesis. The most recent was the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) 2017 exhibition on clothing and fashion, *ITEMS: Is Fashion Modern?* The exhibition included a display of red bandanas as an example of a classic fashion object. The accompanying wall text and catalog included a description of the hanky code as having "emerged among gay men in the United States, who used colored bandan(n)as to communicate their sexual desires and proclivities to potential

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 36-38.

¹⁶⁸ Reilly and Saethre, 2014, 69-77.

¹⁶⁹ Davolt, 1997, 21.

¹⁷⁰ Gary W. Harper, Bruce Douglas, Pedro Serrano, and Omar B. Jamil, "The Role of the Internet in the Sexual Identity Development of Gay and Bisexual Male Adolescents" in *The Story of Sexual Identity: Narrative Perspectives on the Gay and Lesbian Life Course* (New York; Oxford University Press, 2009), 301.

partners.”¹⁷¹ The descriptions of the hanky code phenomenon by Bean and Paola Antonelli (for MoMA), are consistent with descriptions of hanky code usage in the literature of other fashion historians and scholars referenced in this study.

This chapter has extrapolated key interpretations from the literature and existing primary source material in documenting historic determining the cultural significance of the hanky code, and its impact on queer culture.

¹⁷¹ Paola Antonelli, and Michelle Millar Fisher, *ITEMS: Is Fashion Modern?* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2017), 52.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This thesis explores the history, chronology, and evolution of the hanky code phenomenon and its cultural impact. Academic literature was reviewed, primary and secondary source material from repositories examined, and online content researched. The researcher visited repositories of LGBT-focused material across the United States and attended LGBT events to document real-time instances of hanky code flagging. Using grounded theory as the preferred research method, this thesis builds on existing literature through an examination of material to analyze the cultural impact and document the history and cultural significance of the hanky code phenomenon on queer identity formation and presentation.

As indicated in Chapter 1, limited literature addressed the hanky code phenomenon, minimally discussing it as a sartorial coding system that uses bandanas to express sexual availability and behaviors, or fetishes. Although Hal Fischer's photo-documentary book *Gay Semiotics* and Dr. Reilly's / Dr. Saethre's article in *Critical Studies in Men's Fashion* are two examples of significant literature on the hanky code, the hanky code's impact on contemporary queer dress and identity is missing from much of the existing literature. This thesis attempted to resolve the absence of such exploration and presents the hanky code as a phenomenon that remains as relevant to contemporary gay identity as it did during the height of its original use in the mid-1970s.

The grounded theory approach for this research topic was ideal, as it was unclear what was going to be discovered from the examination of all the research material. The ephemeral and covert nature of the hanky code phenomenon made the task of establishing the hanky code's origins difficult. Further complicating the search for primary source materials was the lack of cross-referencing of the subject matter in repository databases, as well as other origin information on decoder lists, such as creation dates and location.

Findings indicated that the hanky code most likely began as a way for individuals interested in the practice of brachioproctic insertion to identify other practitioners with a red bandana to differentiate from the use of keys representing sexual availability. This is consistent with Thom Magister's speculation that the hanky code "probably began with the red hankie used by the FFA (Fist Fuckers of America)...," a queer BDSM social group interested in the sexual practice of brachioproctic insertion, or "fisting."¹⁷²

Documentation also indicated that a "first wave" of high use occurred in the mid-1970s, and continued until the early 1980s, when the AIDS crisis deterred the practice of anonymous and other high-risk sexual practices. A "second wave" of interest in the hanky code began as colors associated with fetishes identified via the hanky code began to appear in clothing used by BDSM practitioners, commonly known as "fetishwear." Black leather accented with the color of choice based on the fetish of choice to communicate began to appear in the late 1990s. This, along with t-shirts depicting fetishes or incorporating hanky code colors as part of the design,

¹⁷² Magister, 2013, 25.

became staple items of dress during LGBT events where the wearer's interest in said fetish is expressed not only as active search, but also as a part of identity. References in art, literature, film, fashion, and appearances in queer and mainstream popular culture throughout the decades have helped maintain its relevancy while simultaneously documenting its significance in queer culture. Furthermore, the hanky code phenomenon is as much an active and present cultural participant, responding to the queer zeitgeist, and validates the existence of new queer identities as they emerge. What began as a covert sartorial system of queer identification and sexual fetishes evolved to become a way to express queer identity which incorporates sexual practice as part of that identity formation and presentation.

Future areas of study on the hanky code phenomenon exist. This thesis focuses on the study of the hanky code phenomenon in the United States. One possible area of study the cultural impact of the hanky code in queer communities across the world. Just as the hanky code use extended to various cities across the United States, the hanky code phenomenon is practiced in other countries with queer BDSM communities.¹⁷³ This thesis prompts similar questions which can be answered in this global perspective, such as:

- When does the presence of the hanky code phenomenon occur in other countries? How does that happen?
- How do color/fetish associations translate in other countries?
- In countries where acts of same-sex desire are illegal or vilified, are covert sartorial coding systems like the hanky code in use?

¹⁷³ Chaline, 2000, 92.

- Is there an influence of European fetish fashions directly or indirectly influenced by the hanky code via American fetish fashions?
- Has the hanky code become a form of open queer expression in other countries as it has in the United States?

Not only did the hanky code see continuous use as a sartorial device for communicating specific sexual interests, the hanky code continued to evolve and adapt within (queer and non-queer) fetish culture. Lighter and darker values of existing colors, new colors, color combinations, other motifs, other fabrics, and non-fabric alternatives appeared on the list as the number of sexual fetishes being expressed more openly increased.

Many fetishes remain taboo, however. The practice of certain fetishes remain undesirable, even according to the standards of many BDSM practitioners. Despite this, many practitioners will brave possible judgement, either through self-confidence, or through the idea that little is still known about hanky code flagging. One respondent to an online discussion board of a particular fetish described his experience: “I flag yellow and brown and wear yellow and brown camo with Doc Martins with yellow laces and people don’t generally have a clue.”¹⁷⁴

Perhaps additional education, awareness, representation and other evolutionary shifts in the hanky code will include increased tolerance, acceptance, or celebration of these fetishes.

It is possible that moral objection to the study of queer sexuality has hindered study of the hanky code’s significance in queer dress, identity, and culture. Only more

¹⁷⁴ *Message Board*, Scatboi.com: <http://www.scatboi.com/forum/show.php?id=14648>, accessed March 5, 2014.

recently do we see a renewed interest in the hanky code, partially for nostalgia and also for its continued presence and relevance in contemporary queer culture. It is a subtle, nuanced declaration of one's sexual adventurousness, reinforcing and emphasizing the sex in sexuality.

Regarding the queer use of sartorial codes or signifiers, Fischer determined that it is "impossible most of the time to determine a gay man's sexual preference either in terms of activity or passive/aggressive nature. Gays have many more sexual possibilities than straight people and therefore need a more intricate communication system."¹⁷⁵

From queer necessity was born queer inventiveness, as centuries of coopting appearances, behaviors, environments, and technology for the purposes of same sex desire, from public bathrooms to the hanky code to the internet.¹⁷⁶

In a book about Robert Mapplethorpe, Arthur Danto writes that "[t]he seventies were an era of liberation, a period dedicated to the casting down of barriers to free expression and to personal fulfillment, and this was especially true in the domain of sex...[H]omosexuals were encouraged to declare their identities and to articulate their emotional and physical needs as a matter of civil right."¹⁷⁷ The hanky code is one of the best exemplifications of this ethos.

With increased literature on the subject, a newfound appreciation and interest in queer sexuality as a cultural construct, and nostalgia, activists, scholars, artists,

¹⁷⁵ Fischer, 2015, 20-21.

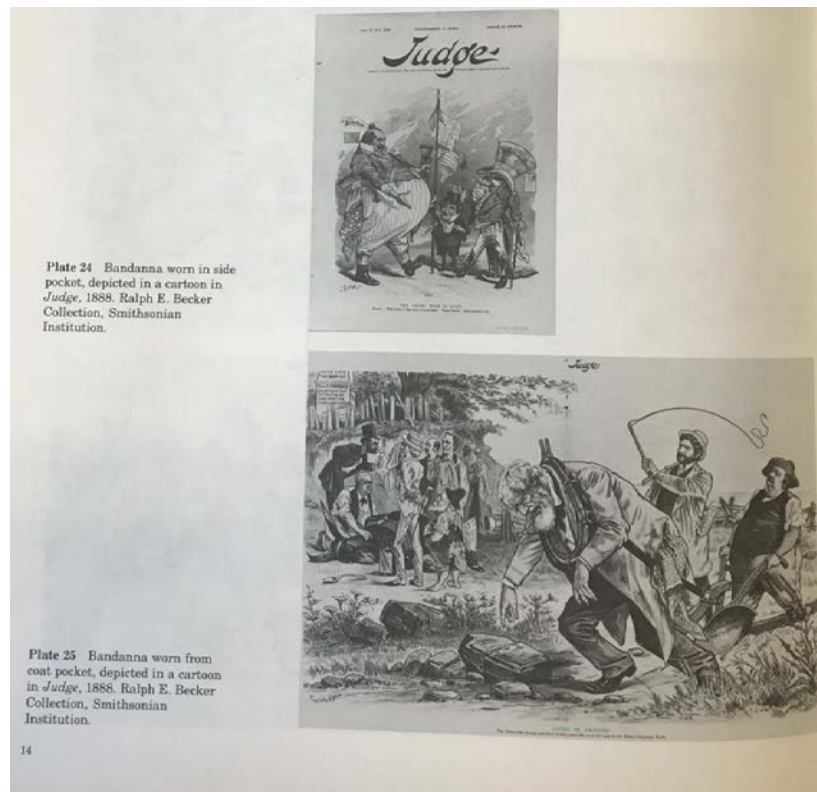
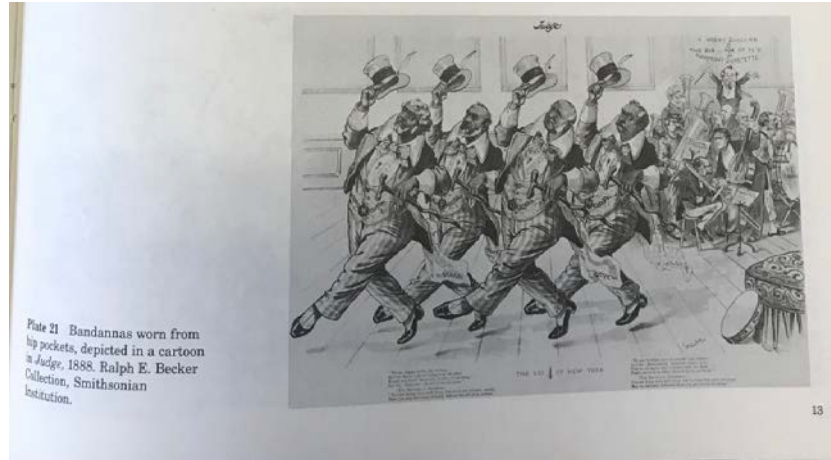
¹⁷⁶ Unknown, Author. "The Great Gay Sex Tech Takeover". *Gay Times*. March, 2017. London: Gay Times, Ltd., 2017. Pp. 31-33.

¹⁷⁷ Arthur C. Danto, *Playing With the Edge: The Photographic Achievement of Robert Mapplethorpe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 74.

journalists, historians, and cultural anthropologists will continue to draw from the hanky code phenomenon, helping to preserve its cultural legacy.

APPENDIX A

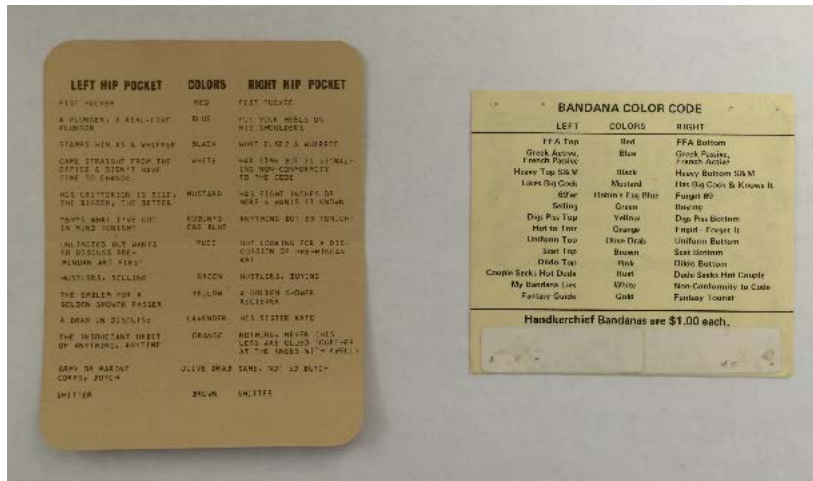
FIGURES



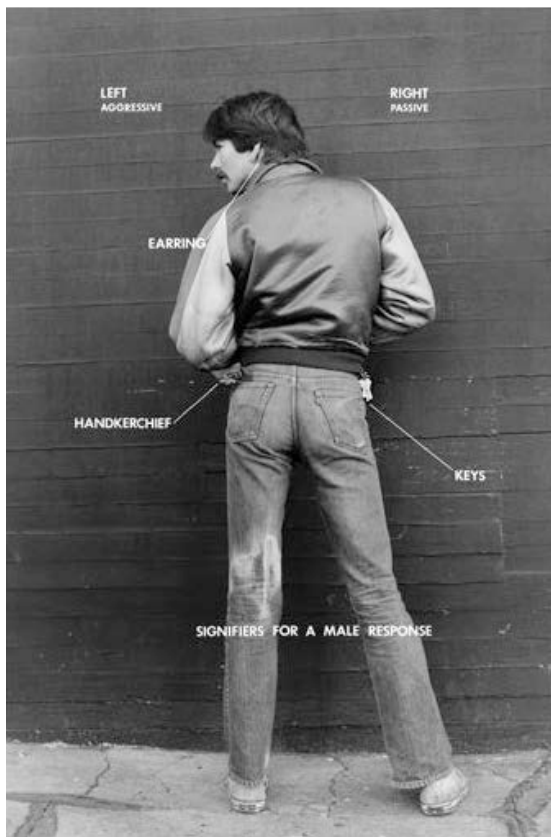
Figures 1a-b. Political illustrations of bandanas worn in pockets originally printed in *Judge*, 1888. Ralph E. Becker Collection, Smithsonian Institution. From *Threads of History: Americana Recorded on Cloth 1775 to the Present*, pp. 13-14.



Figure 2. Paul Cadmus, *The Fleet's In*, 1934. Naval History & Heritage Command, Washington, DC. Image Credit: unknown.



Figures 3a-b. Early hanky codes. GLBT Historical Society.



Figures 4a-b. Images from the book *Gay Semiotics* by Hal Fischer, 1977. Image Credit: Hal Fischer. Courtesy of Hal Fischer.

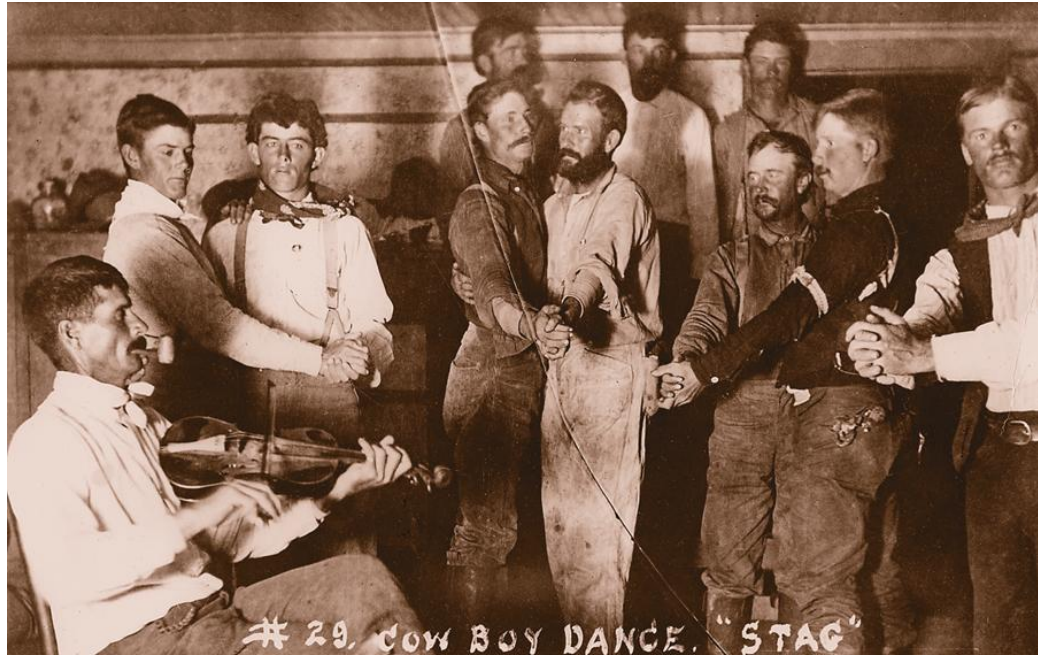


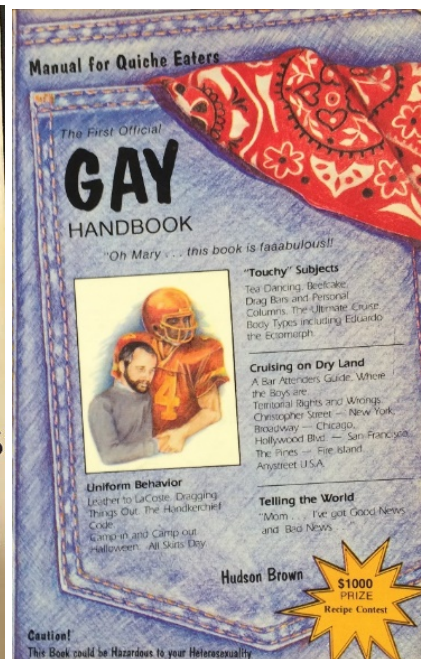
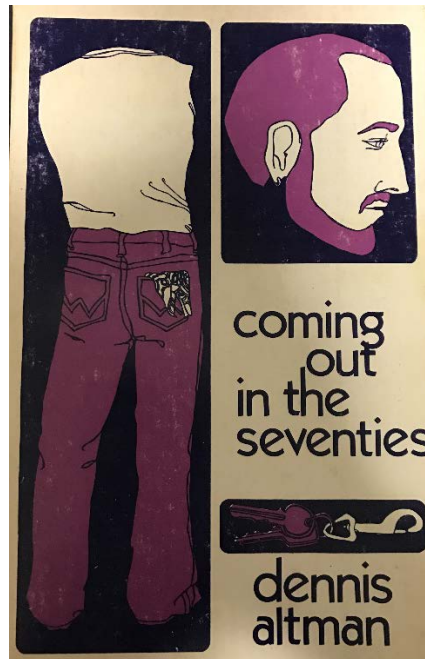
Figure 5. Photograph/photo postcard. #29, *COWBOY DANCE "STAG"* by unknown photographer, c. 1910. From *Dear Friends: American Photographs of Men Together, 1840-1918*, page 33. Digital image credit: unknown.



Figures 6a-b. Safer sex flagging. Left: Safer sex kit, 1993. Sexual Minorities Archive. Right: “Safe sex” flagging. Image Source: Leather Archives & Museum Instagram feed (@leatherarchives). Photo credit: unknown.



Figure 7. From *Band of Bikers* by Scott Zieher, published by powerHouse Books. No page. Photograph credit: unknown.



Figures 8a-c. Book covers with hanky code imagery. Clockwise from top: *The Gay Picturebook* by Michael Emory (1978), *The First Official Gay Handbook* by Hudson Brown (1983), and *Coming Out in the Seventies* by Dennis Altman (1981). Brown and Emory book from the Teri Rose Memorial Library, Leather Archives & Museum.

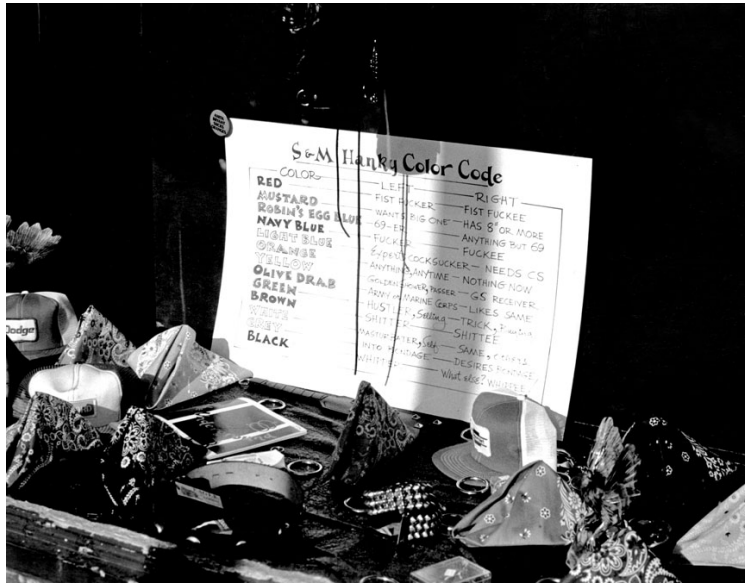


Figure 9. *Untitled* by Hank O’Neal, 1978. Black and white photograph. Courtesy of Hank O’Neal.



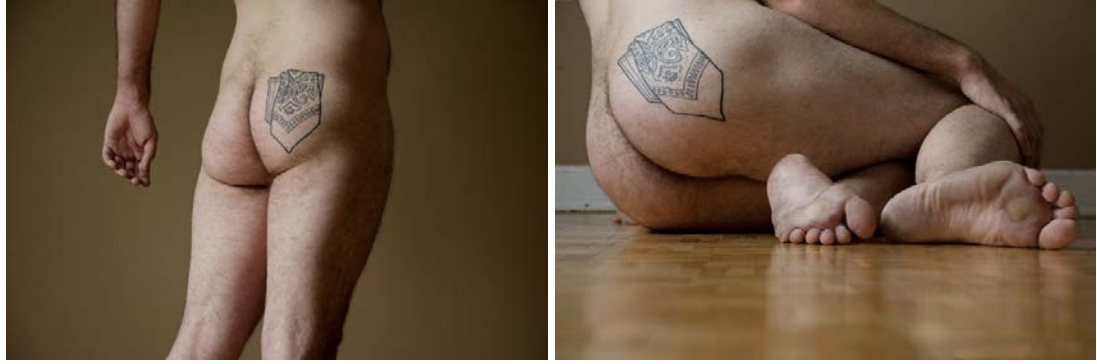
Figure 10. *Chelsea Piers #1* by Peter Hujar, 1976. Black and white photograph. Courtesy of the Peter Hujar Archive.



Figure 11. *Untitled* by Neil Malcom Roberts, 1977. Gelatin silver print. Gift of the Artist. Courtesy of the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art.



Figure 12. TOM OF FINLAND (Touko Laaksonen, Finnish, 1920 – 1991), *Untitled*, 1976, Graphite on paper, © 1976 Tom of Finland Foundation. Courtesy of the Tom of Finland Foundation.



Figures 13a-b. *Blank Hanky, Bottom Right* by Vincent Chevalier, 2010. Body art/performance piece. Photo credit: David J. Romero. Courtesy of Vincent Chevalier. Source: <http://vincentchevalier.ca/index.php?/performance/blank-hanky-bottom-right/>. Accessed September 16, 2016.



Figure 14. *The Milky Way and Other Fairy Tales* by Michael Petry, 2004. Installation View, Sundaram Tagore Gallery, New York. Courtesy of Sundaram Tagore Gallery.



Figure 15a-c Magazine articles with hanky code imagery. Left: *The Leather Journal*, Issue #10, May-July, 1989, Page 18. Sexual Minority Archives. Center: *Drummer* magazine article. Leather Museum and Archives. Right: *Honcho* magazine, March 2002. GLBT Historical Society.



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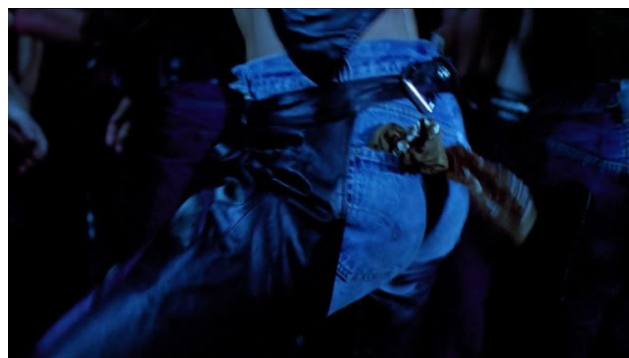


LIGHT BLUE HANKY MEN

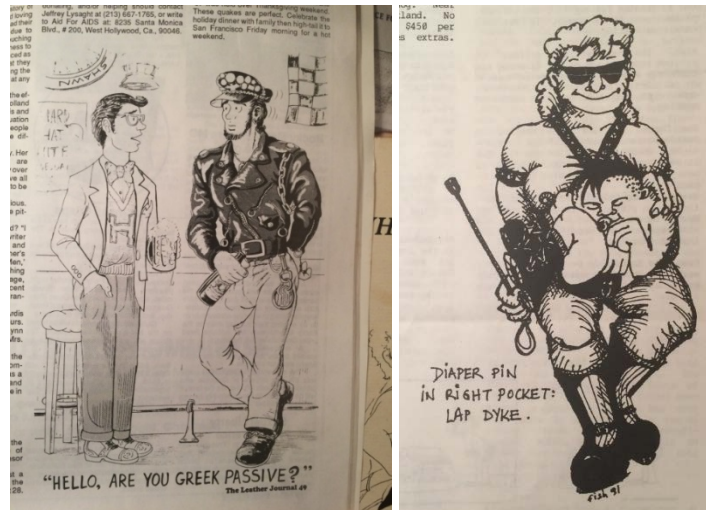
National club with quarterly publication *The Oral Majority*, issue 3 has 60 pages!! \$35 a year gets you four issues with free personal ad (photo too) in each issue. Reader-contributed hot fiction, video reviews, color photo centerfold, artwork by REX and The Hun and more SASE w/over 21 statement for application to WINTER PUBLISHING, PO Box 80667, So Dartmouth, MA 02748. Send in hot stories and keep THE ORAL MAJORITY going!!



Figures 16a-b. Zines, *Raunch* Number 9 (n.d.), page 13; *The Yellow Pages* (n.d.), front cover. GLBT Historical Society.



Figures 17 a-d. Image stills, *Cruising* by William Friedkin, 1980. © Copyright 1980 Warner Bros. Entertainment, Inc.



Figures 18a-b. Comic illustrations. Left: Comic by Shawn as it appeared in *The Leather Journal*, August – September, 1988, page 49. Right: Comic by Fish as it appeared in *The Lunatic Fringe* newsletter, August, 1991, page 3. Sexual Minorities Archives.



Figures 19a-d. Hanky code illustrations by Michael Luong, 2015. From “The New Hanky Code” by Christopher Harrity. Advocate.com, April 22, 2015. Image source: <https://www.advocate.com/comedy/2015/04/22/new-hanky-code#slide-0>. Accessed July 23, 2015.



Figures 20a-b. Retail bandana displays for hanky code flagging. Left: LEATHER64TEN, Chicago, IL, 2015. Right: Mr. S Leather, San Francisco, CA, 2016.



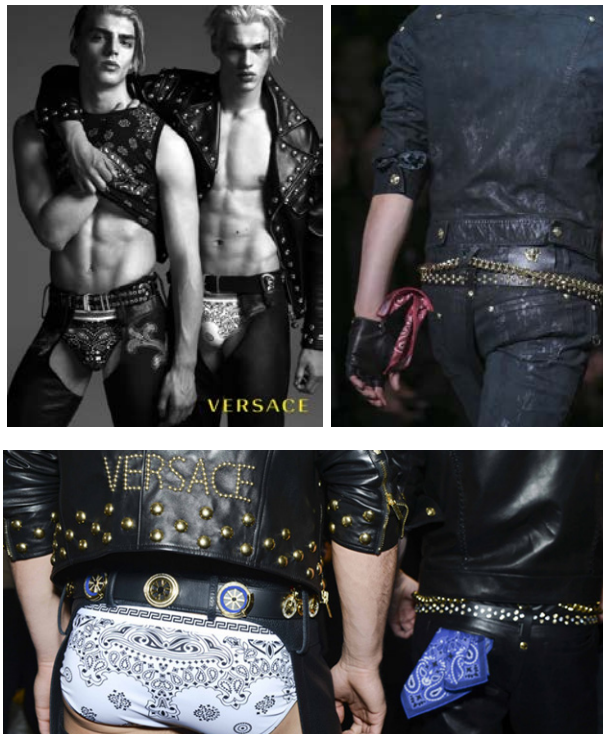
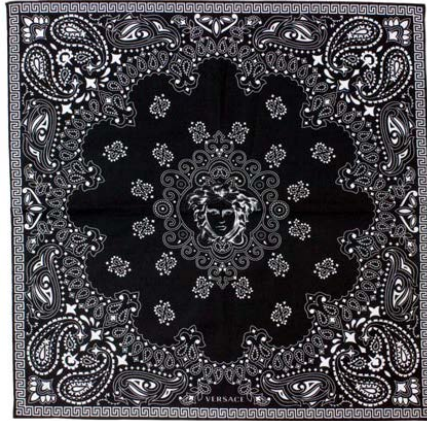
Figure 21. Bandana/handkerchief vendor. Leather Market, International Mr. Leather Contest, Chicago, IL, 2014.



Figures 22a-b. Hanky code party ephemera. Left: Event flyer for The 15 Association, no date. GLBT Historic Society. Right: Button, The Sling Yellow Hankie Party, no date. Photo credit: unknown. Leather Archives & Museum.



Figures 23a-b. Social media advertisement for hanky code nights. Left: Providence Eagle, 2015. Source: Facebook. Accessed November 9, 2015. <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1032419583468816&set=a.108449555865828.4340.100001023516162&type=3&theater>. Right: Eagle NYC, 2014-2015. Courtesy of Brett Schmidt and the Eagle NYC.



Figures 24a-d. Versace Fall 2014 Menswear Collection. Top: Versace bandana for sale via online retailer. Image source: <https://global.rakuten.com/en/store/growaround/item/vesj066/>. Accessed October 28, 2018. Middle, left: Advertisement. Photo credit: Mert Atlas & Marcus Piggott. Image source: <http://top-img.com/d/daniel-versace-2014>. Accessed July 23, 2015. Middle, right: Runway presentation. Photo credit: unknown. Image source: <http://www.vogue.co.uk/fashion/autumn-winter-2014/mens/versace/close-up-photos/gallery/1093688>. Accessed April 4, 2014. Bottom: Runway presentation. *Vada Magazine* (online), March 1, 2014. Photo credit: unknown. Image source: <http://vadamagazine.com/01/03/2014/fashion/gay-male-body-image-fashion>. Accessed April 4, 2014.



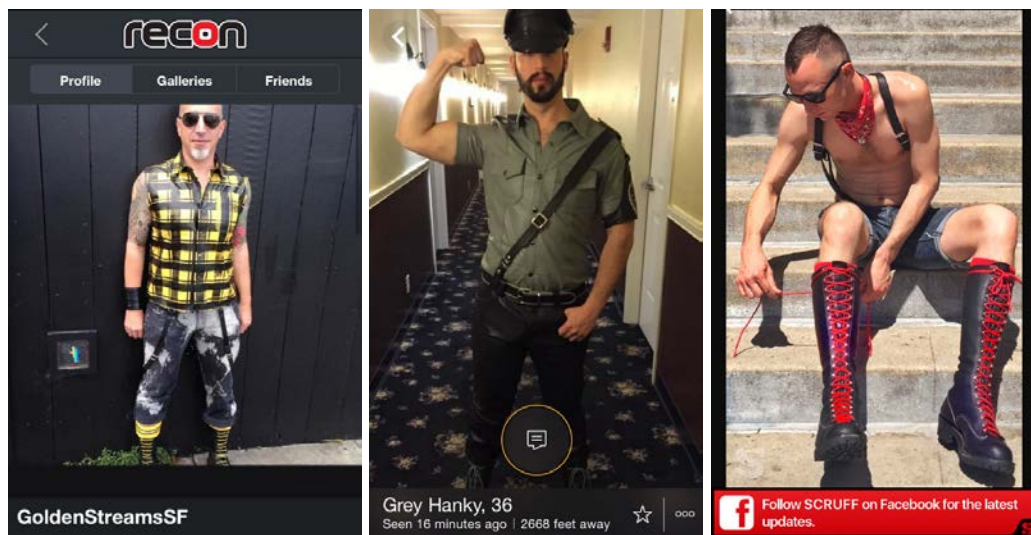
Figures 25a-b. *Burlyshirts* t-shirts designed by Shane Ruff, 2014. Photo credit: Mack Sturgis. Courtesy of Shane Ruff/Ruff Studios.



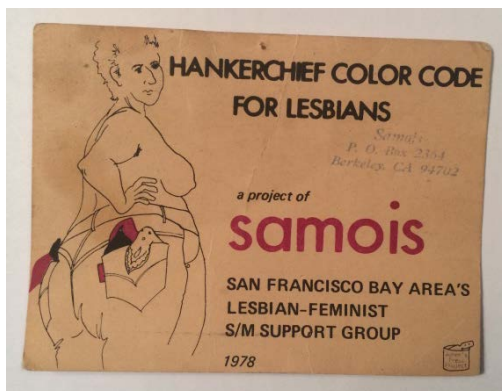
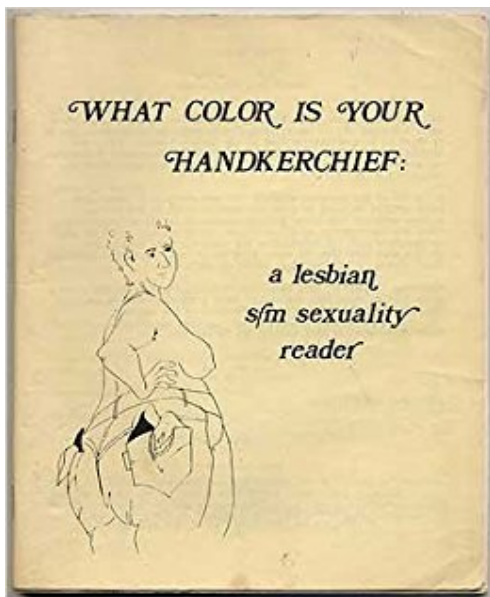
Figures 26a-d. Hanky code flagging. Clockwise, starting top left: Folsom East Street Fair, New York, NY June 22, 2014; Gay Pride Festival and Parade, Providence, RI June 20, 2015; International Mr. Leather Contest and Convention, Chicago, IL, May 24, 2014; Up Your Alley Street Fair, San Francisco, July 31, 2016.



Figures 27a-c. Hanky code inspired book cover designs. Left: *Trust – The Hand Book: A Guide to the Sensual and Spiritual Art of Handballing* by Bert Herman, 1991. Middle: *Running the Gauntlet: An Intimate History of the Modern Body Piercing Movement* by Jim Ward, 2011. Right: *The Mayor of Folsom Street: The Auto/Biography of “Daddy Allan” Selby AKA Mr. S* by Jordy Jones, 2017. Image Source: Amazon.com. Accessed December 15, 2017.



Figures 28a-c. Queer networking app profile images. Left: Recon, 2014. Image source: Recon mobile app. Center: Grindr, 2015. Image source: Grindr mobile app. Right: Scruff, 2016. Image source: Scruff mobile app. Photo credits: unknown. Images used with permission.



COLOR	LEFT SIDE	RIGHT SIDE
Red	Fist Fucker	Fist Fucker
Dark Blue	Gives Anal Sex	Wants Anal Sex
Light Blue	Gives Oral Sex	Wants Oral Sex
Robins Egg Blue	Light S/M, Top	Light S/M, Bottom
Mustard	Food Fetish, Top	Food Fetish, Bottom
Orange	Anything Goes, Top	Anything Goes, Bottom
Yellow	Gives Golden Showers	Wants Golden Showers
Green	Hustler, Selling	Hustler, Buying
Olive Drab	Uniforms/Military, Top	Uniforms/Military, Bottom
White	Likes Novices, Chickenhawk	Novice (or Virgin)
White Lace	Victorian Scenes, Top	Victorian Scenes, Bottom
Gray	Does Bondage	Wants To Be Put In Bondage
Brown	Shit Scenes, Top	Shit Scenes, Bottom
Black	Top, Heavy S/M & Whipping	Bottom, Heavy S/M & Whipping
Purple	Piercer	Piercee
Martian	Likes Menstruating Women	Is Menstruating
Lavender	Group Sex, Top	Group Sex, Bottom
Pink	Breast Fondler	Breast Fondlee

Figures 29a-c. Samois lesbian hanky code ephemera. Top: *What Color is your Handkerchief: a lesbian s/m reader*, 1979. Bottom: *Hankerchief Color Code for Lesbians*, 1978. From the Collection of the Sexual Minorities Archives.



Figures 30a-b. Lesbian/Femme flagging. Left: Hanky Flowers by Kinkycraft. Photo credit: www.shilomccabe.com. Courtesy of Shilo McCabe. Right: Lesbian flagging, International Mr. Leather Contest and Convention, Chicago, IL, 2014.



Figure 31. Transgender flagging. Up Your Alley Street Fair, San Francisco, 2016.



Figure 32. Pup flagging. Photo credit: unknown. Image source: https://www.misterpuppy.nl/mr-puppy-nl-2017-pics/003_dsc2518/#main. Accessed October 28, 2018.

APPENDIX B

TABLES

Color	Fetish	Lighter Tone	Fetish
Robin's Egg Blue	69	Light Blue (Powder Blue)	Fellatio
Yellow	Water Sports	Light Yellow (Pale Yellow)	Spit
Brown	Scat	Beige	Rimming
Black	Heavy S&M	Grey	Light S&M
Red	Fisting	Pink (light pink)	Dildo Play

Table 1. Examples of expanded hanky code color/fetish associations with lighter tone color/fetish associations.

Fetish – Flag Left	Handkerchief Color	Fetish – Flag Right
Likes Black Bottoms	Black/White Stripe	Likes Black Tops
Likes Latin Bottoms	Brown/White Stripe	Likes Latin Tops
Likes Asian Bottoms	Yellow/White Stripe	Likes Asian Tops

Table 2a. Ethnic/Racially-based hanky code color/fetish associations for anal intercourse.

Fetish – Flag Left	Handkerchief Color	Fetish – Flag Right
Wants White Cocksucker	Light Blue/White Dots	Sucks White Cock
Wants Black Cocksucker	Light Blue/Black Dots	Sucks Black Cock
Wants Latino Cocksucker	Light Blue/Brown Dots	Sucks Latino Cock
Wants Asian Cocksucker	Light Blue/Yellow Dots	Sucks Asian Cock

Table 2b. Ethnic/Racially-based hanky code color/fetish associations for fellatio.

Handkerchief Color/Motif	Fetish/Identity
Fire hydrant motif	Pup
Bone motif on red background	Fisting Pup
bone motif on blue background	Fucking or oral Pup
bone motif on yellow background	Piss Pup

Table 3. Hanky code color/fetish associations for Pups.

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