What conditions must be in place for s/m sexuality to be tolerated in law and culture? In this article, I consider the film Secretary as a lens to explore the imaginative limits of our socio-legal culture regarding sadomasochism. In Part One, I compare Secretary to the film 9 ½ weeks. I deconstruct the narrative and aesthetic components of the two films that uphold their contrasting normative visions, arguing that Secretary did indeed chart new ground for the sadomasochist sexual subject. Yet, a close discursive analysis reveals that the narrative relied upon other hegemonies to make the s/m couple acceptable and intelligible: their whiteness, their attractiveness, their male-top/female-bottom gender dynamic, the mildness of their kinks, and their interpolation into the law of marriage. In Part Two, I consider Secretary in relation to a trilogy of British cases on s/m, R. v. Brown, R. v. Wilson, and R. v. Emmett, and one American divorce case on s/m, Twyman v. Twyman. Reading these cases in relation to Secretary reveals the extent to which tolerance of s/m in the socio-legal imaginary is contingent upon marital privacy and spousal fidelity.

By doing a comparative analysis of Secretary's normative vision to other socio-legal narratives, I hope to reveal the complexity involved in assessing the (counter-)hegemonic impact of the film.

This paper draws upon my dissertation, “Sadomasochism Once Removed: S/m in the Socio-Legal Imaginary,” in which I analyze the interaction between cultural and legal constructions and regulations of s/m.