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RISKING SEXUALITY BEYOND CONSENT: OVERWHELM AND TRAUMATISMS THAT INCITE

BY AVGI SAKETOPOULOU

What, other than being "screwed," may come of being subjected to something we did not entirely, or even at all, consent to? This essay explores what awaits sexual urges that risk pushing beyond the confines of affirmative consent and into limit consent. Taking up why one might court experiences that chafe against the limit, I suggest that such courting draws on the sexual drive. Via Aulagnier, Laplanche, and Zaltzman I track how the sexual drive may annex traumatic history. These annexations present themselves as traumatic repetitions but may work, at times, to spin compulsive recursions into traumatisms that can incite transformative psychic labor. To probe these ideas more deeply and flesh out the mechanics of why experiences that occur at the border of our consent can have transformative potential, I turn to Jeremy

[1] I am thankful to Tim Dean, Andrew Druck and Ann Pellegrini for their incisive and tireless critical comments on earlier drafts of this essay. My colleague Dominique Scarfone offered several challenging queries that helped deepen my thinking, for which I am grateful. Last, my deep appreciation to Jay Greenberg for his invitation to contribute my essay to this special issue.

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O. Harris's searingly beautiful theatrical work, Slave Play, to propose that pleasure suffered at the especially strained intersection of sexuality and racial trauma may produce traumatisms that dissolve ego structures in growth-inducing ways. While seemingly merely repeating ghastly historical crimes, erotic humiliation and racialized sexual abjection, work here to yield and make overatures to expanded psychic freedoms. Because there is no return to a pre-traumatic state for traumatized subjects, I propose that we become less preoccupied as analysts with what can be done about trauma and more curious about what can be done with trauma shifting, thus, psychoanalysis s attitude towards trauma from traumatophobia to traumatophilia.

Keywords Jean Laplanche, Nathalie Zaltzman, inciting traumatism, limit consent, overwhelm, sadomasochism, traumatophilia, BDSM, *Slave Play*.

"I was female-assigned at birth"[2] writes the queer theorist Kathryn Bond Stockton:

> though [my own sense was that] I was a boy … mistaken for a girl. And though I was, to my mind, the ultimate straight man seeking normally feminine women, I turned out a "lesbian," against my will — though in accord with my desires. As for my girlfriend she grew up, to her mind, normally feminine, as a rural Mormon raised in rural Utah. In her twenties, after her male fiancé died, after she didn t go on a mission, after she walked across the US for nuclear disarmament, she met lesbians and wished she could be one, so cool did they seem to her. But, she figured, she wasn t a lesbian. Long story short: I didn t want the sign ["lesbian"] but was pierced by it; she quite wanted it but didn t think she d gain it. We have [both] been dildoed by th[at] sign. We ve been pleasured by it, as it s

[2] This awkward-sounding term refers to the assignation of gender at birth on the basis of observed genitals. It is widely used in trans studies to mark the fact that such assignments presume that gender is determined by anatomical sex when, in fact, only time will tell if the child s gender identity will match or not that initial reading.

> come inside us—I ve had to try to take it like a man. [2 15, online]

Stockton s surprising, albeit sideways,[3] treatment of consent is easy to miss. Her delectable phrase ("against my will-though in accord with my desire") is followed by a provocative, queer claim: that she has been "dildoed" by the word lesbian. The word "dildoed" does some heavy lifting here: being described as a lesbian interpellated Stockton as a woman;[4] because she had thought herself to be a boy, this "screwed" her; this screwing is something she s tried to take "like a man." Is this wordplay meant to convey the stoicism with which men, as the story goes, are expected to endure hardship? Or is Stockton gesturing to a queer masculinity of anal pleasures? Whatever the case may be, Stockton claims a peculiar relationship to being screwed: it is against her will, but in accord with her desires.

In this essay, I will explore what, other than being "screwed," may come of being subjected—by discourse, history, or through the intervention of the other—to something to which we did not entirely, or even at all, consent. Elsewhere, I have called experiences that live on the border of our consent *limit consent* (Saketopoulou 2 19). Unlike affirmative consent, limit consent doesn t concern itself with roadmaps that specify what the other is/isn t allowed to do but pertains, instead, to what we open ourselves up to when we surrender to an other. In that sense, limit consent doesn t aim to (re)stage an experience of satisfaction, but, instead, invites fresh experience and surprise. As such, it also risks injury; that injury would be inadvertent, issuing from sexual urges that have gone too far. In this paper I ask after limit consent s psychic life and its possible futures to probe why one might court experiences that chafe against the limit. I will suggest that such courting draws on the sexual drive, and travels on the carrier wave of repetition to create states of overwhelm, which may catalyze psychic transformations. In the second half of this essay, I turn to Jeremy O. Harris painfully beautiful work, *Slave Play*. I discuss it at length

[3] I am playing here with Stockton s felicitous description of the queer child as growing up sideways (2 9).

[4] Briefly, the word "lesbian" does not just index the gender of one s erotic object choice but denotes a homology between the genders of the person desiring and the person desired. In that sense, sexual orientation is not only about one s desire but also about one's own gender identity. For more on the mechanics of such interpellations, see Saketopoulou, 2 15a.

because watching it several times and across two productions,[5] and attending ongoing conversations about it over several months,[6] helped me clarify the workings of overwhelm. *Slave Play* suggests that pleasure that is suffered at the especially strained intersection of sexuality and racial trauma may produce traumatisms that dissolve ego structures in growth-inducing ways. *Slave Play* helped me ferret out the specific mechanisms through which erotic humiliation and racialized sexual abjection, while seemingly merely repeating ghastly historical crimes, may, in fact, work to help some of the play s characters bring more into their possession that which "screwed" them. The concept of overwhelm helps explain psychoanalytically the mechanics of how such psychic work may be accomplished, and what its yield may be: not utopian reparation but a bid for expanded psychic freedom. While there is indeed no "strategy of redress" or complete redemption for Black suffering (Wilderson 2 2 , p. 15) and even as such expansions are only partial solutions, they may ultimately be better ones. Because there is no return to a pre-traumatic state for traumatized subjects, I propose that we become less preoccupied as analysts with what can be done *about* trauma and more curious about what can be done *with* trauma.

PART ONE

1. To be Dildoed by the Signifier: Aulagnier and Primary Violence, Laplanche and Translation

Let us first return to Stockton s having been dildoed by the sign. To reflect on her ideas, I will draw on Piera Aulagnier, a French psychoanalyst whose work uniquely addresses how the psychic process of coming into being tangles from the getgo the non-consensual with pleasure.

Signs or, to migrate to analytic terminology, the signifiers by which the infant s early psychic life can be churned into experience precede us

[5] The play ran at the New York Theatre Workshop between November 19, 2 18 to January 13, 2 19 and, subsequently, on Broadway where it ran from October 6, 2 19 to January 19, 2 2 .

[6] On most Sundays throughout the play s run, the production held open-ended conversations between members of the cast/production and anyone interested in attending them. While new people joined the conversation at each meeting, a core group of theatergoers soon emerged that returned to the space week after week to revisit, with the cast and with each other, some of the most bracing parts of the play.

and are not of our choosing. Embedded in a network of other signifiers, they are linked with each other through the connective tissue of discourse. For Aulagnier, discourse does not refer to language per se, but to the aggregate effects of how the social is structured and how, in turn, it structures us (1975). Discourse inflects the adult s ongoing stream of gestures, facial expressions, affect, acts, and words, thus infiltrating the adult s responses to the child. The adult symbolizes the infant s experience in verbal and non-verbal ways and, in so doing, formats and gives it a shape. This is how the primal,[7] that is, the raw material of the infant s early life before the "I" becomes organized into a self, gets forged into usable units of experience. The shape given to the primal is, in part, influenced by the parent s own dynamics, early history, and psychic conflicts. But Aulagnier s point is that caretakers are not independent or sovereign agents; they are themselves subject—and answerable—to external regimes of organized meanings which furnish them with their meaning-making templates. The infant s ego, in effect, draws on these parental templates for its constitutive, meaning-making efforts. Discourse thus offers the much-needed midwifing tools the young psyche needs to come into being. By implication, the ego is an assemblage of psychic representations that are largely delimited by what is socially representable and intelligible.

Aulagnier is especially sensitive to the implications of the infant s meaning-making endeavors. Although forming representations (binding) is a pleasurable activity, she sees it as also exerting on the infant a form of violence that she calls *primary violence*. To be clear, Aulagnier does not refer to physical violence, or to the caretaker s intention to prohibit, control, or oppress the infant s meaning-making efforts.[8] The

[7] To clarify, the notion of the "primal" does not refer to what comes chronologically first. While indeed, the primal "is present from the beginning, concretely, at the origin of the human being, in other words: in the nursling" for Laplanche it is "what is ineluctable, what is truly independent of all contingencies, even the most general … The primal situation is the confrontation of the newborn—of the infant, the infans in the etymological sense of the term: the one who does not yet speak—with the adult world" (1987, pp. 1 1-1 2).

[8] We know, of course, that this can also occur, e.g. when the caretaker suffers from pathology or is traumatized. In this case, we d be closer to what Aulagnier described as secondary violence, and to what Laplanche called intromission. Secondary violence and intromission are traumatic because they impose meaning, prohibiting the infant from carrying out its independent, creative meaning-making work.

concept of primary violence draws attention to the fact that the raw materials available for the infant to craft representations are definitionally restricted-and therefore, restrict*ive*. No one, after all, accepts the plague of the other s sexual unconscious willingly; a certain degree of force, not a physical force but the force of primal seduction (Laplanche 1987), is necessary. Even when the infant is free to improvise in forging her translations, primary violence delimits, from the get-go, *how* something will become psychically represented.[9] Put differently, primary violence places constraints on the most elemental level of human becoming, even though its mediation is indispensable for the infant to generate meaning at all.[1] This is the psychic landscape of limit consent; even before the "I" is inaugurated, a lot has already happened without one s agreement but which, nevertheless, yields pleasure.

Aulagnier s ideas are highly compatible with Laplanche s. For him, briefly,[11] conscious messages conveyed during caretaking are always surcharged by the caretaker s sexual unconscious. These indecipherable messages (*enigma*) are implanted, like an irritant, on the infant s psychophysiological skin (*primal seduction*). The infant is compelled to interpret these enigmatic implantations. But because enigma obtains from the caretaker s unrepresented unconscious, it can never be accurately decoded. Meaning can only be ascribed to it (*translation),* which is how we form representations. Translations are remembered as memories (Scarfone 2 15a), yet we should not forget that these memories are not veridical but built through the infant s fantasizing (Scarfone 2 16). As for the enigmatic remnants that haven t become meaning-full, those

[9] In that respect, while for Laplanche, it is the term intromission that denotes violence insofar as intromission imposes meaning (Laplanche 1987, 2 11; House 2 17), I maintain that, of the two, it is actually implantation that is more durably traumatic. This is because implantation is an ordinary, routine and non-contingent occurrence. Intromission has a chance of being identified as being of foreign origin, as having infiltrated us from the outside whereas implantations, because they are constitutive to the sense of self, can never be marked as having invaded the subject from without.

[1] A world without discourse, myths, or symbols is unimaginable. If, in some imaginary universe it existed, it would be catastrophic. Not only would it not provide greater translational freedom but, on the contrary, it would deprive the psyche of the much-needed tools for meaning-making.

[11] For a fuller review of Laplanche s ideas, see Scarfone s (2 13) and Fletcher s (2 7) excellent introductions.

become repressed, forming, in effect, the sexual unconscious-with infantile sexuality at its core. There, they persist as question marks without answers but which press for answers anyway, a pressure that constitutes the sexual drive. Like Aulagnier, Laplanche also believes that translation occurs through interpretative codes used to represent the press of the sexual drive. For its translational endeavors the infant resorts to a cultural reservoir of "objets trouvés" (Saketopoulou 2 17b), namely the socius and its "rules, myths, ideologies and ideals" (*mythosymbolic*) (Laplanche 1987, p. 87).

I will return in Part Two to an accounting of signifiers, to their dildoing effects, and to their overtures to enlarged psychic freedom. But, for now, I want to stay with the sexual implications of what it means to be screwed against one s wishes, but in accord with one s desire. Enter the queer theorist Tim Dean whom we will follow to a gay men s sex club to hear about his experience with piss play, the erotic practice of urination for sexual pleasure (2 15).[12] In his dabbles in the world of piss play, Dean had been, up until this particular encounter, "happy to give but unwilling to receive" (2 15, p. 122). Things changed, however, one night when, following a leather-capped stranger into the shadows:

> … [he] pushed me to my knees … encouraging me to work his soft cock through the mesh of his jockstrap. My mouth registered that the jockstrap was already damp … [W]hen I became aware that he was gently pissing through the jock, the tasteless warm fluid flooding my lips, I spontaneously ejaculated. Both his piss and my body s response *took me completely by surprise*. I did not consent—and *would not have consented*—to being pissed on; yet I loved it. That night the man in the leather cap, whose face I never saw, gave me the gift of erotic astonishment. [2 15, p. 125, italics added]

I read Dean s vignette to propose a different way of thinking about sexual consent, and use it to help me theorize the workings of sexuality

[12] Early psychoanalysts exploring the polymorphous pleasures of urethral eroticism reached varied insights that would take us too far afield to explore here (see Coriat 1924; Freud 19 5, 1932; Hitschmann 1923). My focus will be on mining Dean s vignette for what it can tell us about sexuality that operates against one s consent but in accord with one s desire.

beyond consent. How do we understand "erotic astonishment" analytically and why should psychoanalysts care? Is Dean s erotic astonishment, which, I ll argue, amounts to more than just physical pleasure, related to the absence of his consent[13]? I think that it is. Of course, even intimating that a sexuality beyond consent is worth theorizing—let alone "having"—will raise concerns. Affirmative consent, we are told, is the key ingredient to ethical sexual relations; it ensures that power differentials are well-tended and sees to it that ongoing and enthusiastic agreement is secured. It promises mutual sexual pleasure and a protection from trauma, not to mention legal liability. Affirmative consent, consent theorist Joe Fischel argues, has "magnetized us" (2 19, p. 176), it has been established as the sole acceptable ethical rudder. Today, according to Dufourmantelle, "the principle of precaution has become the norm" (2 19, p. 1). Not just the lawman, but the actuary now oversee sexual encounters.

And yet, Fischel continues, affirmative consent is too conceptually limp to deliver on its promises of mutual pleasure and safety, or to adjudicate desire (2 16, 2 19). From a psychoanalytic angle, it is easy to see why: the affirmative consent model presumes a fully conscious subject when desire is often unconsciously conflicted; traumatic irruptions complicate agency and incite repetitions; psychic time, especially the time of psychic trauma, is non-linear, introducing perilous asynchronies between consent negotiations and internal experience. Mostly, affirmative consent seeks to reproduce known pleasures, or, at least, pleasures that can be hoped for or envisioned (meaning, already psychically represented ones)—when the sexual courts the strange (Dean forthcoming), and the ineffable (Dimen 2 1, 2 17; Fonagy 2 8; Stein 1998, 2 8).

These critiques notwithstanding, speaking about consent that congregates to the limit is scary territory. Limit consent may have animated the encounter that generated Dean s erotic astonishment, but someone less able to give oneself over to a new and startling experience might have felt injured by the novelty, or even experienced it as a form of rape. Obviously, in veering away from the contractualized reciprocity demanded by affirmative consent, my point is not to endorse violation:

[13] Let s not forget also that the absence of consent is not isomorphic with a violation of consent.

what I want to do, is explore the psychic processes set in motion when one lets oneself become passible to an other, coming up against the limits of the ego. Lyotard s notion of passibility (*passibilité*), to which I ll return shortly, is a border concept, hovering between activity and passivity. It involves giving oneself over to the other, not in capitulation or masochistic surrender, but in a state of receptivity akin to a state of dispossession (1988; see also Scarfone 2 11).[14]

To go forward from here, let s turn back the clock by a hundred years.

2. *A Hundred Years Ago Today*

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* Freud described:

> … as 'traumatic any excitations from outside … powerful enough to break through the protective shield … the concept of trauma necessarily implies a connection of this kind with a breach in an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli. Such an event as an external trauma is bound to provoke a disturbance on a large scale in the functioning of the organism's energy … There is no longer any possibility of preventing the mental apparatus from being flooded with large amounts of stimulus, and another problem arises … mastering the amounts of stimulus which have broken in and of binding them, in the psychical sense, so that they can then be disposed of. [192 , p. 1 2]

Trauma, in this account,[15] arises when external excitations breach the protective shield, leaving the overwhelmed ego scurrying to try to bind them. But the problem of how the organism manages the influx of energy preoccupied Freud from much earlier. In *The Project* (1895),[16] Freud first proposed the following model of the ego: outside energy excites neurones whose job it is to conduct and discharge it.

[14] Passibility s ties to Ghent s concept of surrender (199), have been explored elsewhere (Saketopoulou 2 19).

[15] For Freud, it is psychic trauma that is of interest to psychoanalysis in its distinctive quality of the après-coup (House 2 17). I take this into account shortly.

[16] We know (and Freud likely did too) that *The Project s* physiological models are mistaken. Nevertheless, the insights yielded in *The Project,* later reworked in *The Interpretation of Dreams,* are foundational to Freudian metapsychology (Laplanche 1987).

Impermeable neurones (ψ) are unable to let energy course through them; if the amount of energy reaching them is substantial enough, their contact barrier is broken. Repeated breaches produce *facilitation,* which, simply put, means that a set route is established through which stimuli have previously passed. Neurones that have been broken through together now begin to fire in unison, creating pathways that direct the free flow of energy into what we might think of as a trough. The ego is the aggregate of these neuronal facilitations, a permanently cathected ensemble that ensures discharge does not proceed chaotically. When new kinds of stimulations occur, the ego protects the organism from the unpleasure of freely circulating energy by attracting newly excited neurones, which simply means that the ego assimilates them into its structure. By directing the commerce of psychic energy along established grooves (binding) to preserve the organism from an influx of energy spikes (unbound energy), the well-functioning ego, thus, appropriates unto itself everything that s new and foreign. This enterprise, of course, can never be declared fully successful.

This process has two implications: on the one hand, binding spares the organism from damage. The ego prevents excitation from spreading in unforeseeable and unregulated ways, by doing away with any "excess of reality" (Scarfone 2 15a, p. 3), granting the psyche a sense of stability, and an ongoingness of being free from constant threat. On the other hand, the fact that the ego works to assimilate new experience into preexisting frameworks means that new events will be resisted and inhibited. In that respect, the ego is not just a stabilizing agent but, also, a conservative and inhibiting force (Laplanche 2 11; Scarfone 2 15a); it never fully relinquishes its resistance to novelty. As such, we should expect that *nothing new happens with the ego s consent.*[17] The ego contorts the alien and the unfamiliar into what is already known, and this gobbling up of freshness and surprise, can calcify it. Of course, the ego s resistance, its refusal to consent to novelty if you will, does not mean that nothing new actually occurs. This would be an absurd, easily falsifiable

[17] The ego, of course, does not offer or withhold consent. But I hope that the reader will permit me this anthropomorphizing locution for reasons that will become clear later.

claim. It s incumbent on us, however, to reconcile the ego s stakes in its durable structures with the fact that change does occur.

Our thinking may be helped along by turning to a largely overlooked point made by Freud (1895, 192) who, in discussing breaches of unlimited degree (trauma), also mentions others, of lower intensity which are not incapacitating. Producing "a breach in continuity" (1895, p. 3 7), they cause pain-physical and, perhaps psychic. This intermediary state lies between the steady, well-regulated space of the ego and the disabling effects of trauma. I have elsewhere used the term overwhelm[18] to describe states that arise in these interstices between the ego s concerted investment to keep things stable/knowable/bound, and traumatic territory where the ego is undone. In the psychic topos of overwhelm the ego shatters (Bersani 1986) in the sense that it surrenders its overly tight hold over its translations (binding) (Saketopoulou 2 19). The disaggregation of previously bound enigma from its psychic coatings is pleasurable, impelling the psyche to do renewed work,[19] but it is also anguishing. And it is a transient condition, something that flashes into experience but which cannot be sustained (Bataille, 1957). A radical state of unbinding will urgently seek stability through fresh bindings (new translations) and repression. If neither occurs, we may then encounter psychotic phenomena.

Overwhelm s transiently dysregulated states may be pleasurable but they are also crisis points: in other words, while they are sites of potential they offer no reassurances. We can t know in advance "whether the unbinding, which creates the uncertainty, will lead to restoration of previous binding or to a new binding or to neither" (House 2 19, p. 181). Hence the risk but, also, the potential reward, which is that freed-up enigma (unbound energy) may become differently translated. This opening up of the psyche to the forging of new representations may be nothing less than transformative. Note, however, that new translations do not help "recover … [or]

[18] I have selected the noun form to draw it apart from its more ordinary use as a verb (e.g. "x overwhelmed me") or adjective (e.g. "I found y overwhelming").

[19] The reader will recognize here the allusion to Freud s definition of the drive: ". . . the psychical representative of the stimuli originating from within the organism and reaching the mind, as a measure of the demand made upon the mind for work in consequence of its connection with the body" (1915, p. 122). I use drive throughout this paper in its meaning as a demand for work as opposed to its alternate usage as the drive being the fuel of psychic operations.

regain contact with … our essence" (Foucault 1997, p. 282). Enigma is always a question mark without an answer. What overwhelm offers is far more consequential than "the truth": through the breakdown of old structures, one may emerge reconfigured.

Its potential aside, overwhelm should not be romanticized. Even though pleasurable, the ego s breach is an intense state that may be experienced as painful, disorganizing, even dangerous. Alternatively, the ego s disinvestment of its representations may lead to depersonalization (de M Uzan 2 13). Remember, though, that overwhelm shatters, it does not pulverize. It does not attack the psyche itself, but liquidates, instead, the ego s obdurate links. As analysts, unbound states do, and should, worry us: because of the risk for decompensation, severe acting out, etc., and because we sense that its pleasures can have magnetic effects of detrimental impact. But the distinction between trauma and overwhelm may help us work better with patients who have a propensity to pursue experiences that can breach the ego s barrier, who search for trauma-like experiences. Those can take many forms: performance art, BDSM, extreme sports, etc. At its most formidable, even the psychoanalytic process itself can bring about the ego s unraveling (Laplanche 2 6; see Saketopoulou 2 19 for a clinical example).

In a text that has not yet had wide circulation,[2] Laplanche (198) takes this up in relation to traumatophilia, a concept proposed by Abraham (19 7) but developed by Lowenfeld (1941). Lowenfeld observed that some of his patients, "hunger for experiences and excitement, [showing] a 'greed for impressions " (pp. 117-118), "provok[ing] situations which … become traumatic" (p. 121). The traumas they sought out, though, did not behave as trauma ordinarily does: they were neither ruinous nor detrimental. Instead, they produced generative crises akin to overwhelm. To uphold the distinction between trauma and intense trauma-like excitations that may incite growth-inducing work, I will henceforth use Laplanche s phrase *inciting traumatism* (traumatisme incitateur) (198 , p. 195). For Lowenfeld s patients, inciting traumatisms, that is, the particular behaviors and actions that can lead to

[2] I am grateful to my friend and colleague Dominique Scarfone for alerting me to this passage, and to Jonathan House for generously sharing with me the original French text, which has yet to appear in English.

overwhelm, generated aliveness, and creativity by disrupting structures that had become too stale. This process is akin to Zaltzman s description of the workings of the anarchic drive. For her, excessive binding can make reality too banal, rousing cravings for an encounter with novelty or surprise in order "to create new drive movements" (1979, p. 57). She, too, described patients who, smothered by too much cathexis—what Laplanche called "death by the ego" (1987, p. 171)—and suffocated by their ego s inertia, needed to expose themselves to risky and extreme situations. Zaltzman, more than any other analyst, brought attention to the generative possibilities of unbinding and to the enlivening properties of the drive s anarchy.[21] For her, the need to put one s life at risk or to go to extremes may salvage psychological processes from stalemate or stagnation. Despite appearances to the contrary, the anarchic impulse is in the service of living, a force that "induces a taste for change[22]" (p. 77). Zaltzman called upon analysts to pay attention to patients who pursue *limit experiences* that push the subject to the limit of what s bearable (Bataille 1954, 1957; Blanchot 1969; Foucault 1997, 2 1; Saketopoulou 2 14). The limit, I maintain, may be thought of as the surface of the organized ego, a surface that, as we have seen, is constituted through primary violence and the mythosymbolic, structurizing culture into the psyche. Beyond this threshold the subject feels untethered, helplessly subject to the drives. The processes described by Lowenfeld, Laplanche, and Zaltzman share an emphasis on the transformational heft of moving past sluggish, inert structures.[23] The concept of overwhelm adds a granular theorizing of the specific mechanisms by which

[21] I don t have space here to explain my selective use of her concept of the anarchic, which Zaltzman conceived as a drive unto itself but which I see as more related to Laplache s sexual drives of life and death (2 11). Such a project awaits a forthcoming paper.

[22] Zaltzman s notion of a "taste for change" shouldn t be confused with neoliberal ruses and capitalist plugs that advertise the consumption of new experiences sold to us as expansive and life-changing. Zaltzman refers to something much more nuanced than that: to changes that may take us to places we didn t anticipate when choosing a particular path. These changes are not accretive and supportive of what we already know, and are not of the sort promoted by campaigns that seek to buttress our narcissism (e.g. "be your best self," etc.). They are, rather, about experiences that open us up to the surprising and to the strange in ourselves.

[23] Ferro (2 5) and Oldoini (2 19) have also used the concept of traumatophilia, but with a differently emphasis. I am granting here a more enlarged scope to

inciting traumatisms can shatter the ego (Bersani 1986), disassembling it and thus re-exposing the subject to enigma.

3. Sexuality, the Limit and the Perverse[24]

Foucault, among others, famously proposed that limit experience could be achieved through various means, e.g. ascetic practices, art, meditation, etc. (Martin, Gutman, and Hutton 1988).[25] For specificity s sake, I should clarify, though, that, in my view, what nominates some acts for limit work is not their particular complexion *but their economic charge*. To have the potential to become an inciting traumatism, the behaviors/acts in question need to have been commandeered by the sexual drive, to run on an economy of escalating excitations. Why? Because, from the perspective of Laplanchean metapsychology, it will take a force that large to come up against the limits of the ego s fortifications: to contest the ego s consent and its investment in itself (Blanchot 198)—and to do so without letting up when resistance is mounted and without becoming appropriated into the ego s structure. Since the infantile sexual is at the core of the sexual drive (Scarfone 2 19a), such a force puts us in the domain of sadomasochism, "the most common and the most significant of all … [the infantile sexual] perversions" (Freud 19 5, p. 157).

Not all experiences, however, can meet this economic criterion. Those that readily match the economy of the sexual drive are more likely candidates for such work. I want to highlight three here that are

traumatophilia in that I see it as working to enliven overly rigid ego structures, instead of repairing intromitted traumata.

[24] I have explained elsewhere my commitment to preserving the historically discrediting appellation perversion. Briefly, I use it in a non-pathologizing way and granting it its original, ordinary status as marking polymorphous sexuality that attaches itself to objects opportunistically and which is not organized hetero-procreatively (Freud 19 5; Van Haute and Westerink 2 16, 2 17). I like the term because it conveys an intensity and an edge the economic implications of which are not captured by benign-sounding descriptors like "non-normative sexual practices," "sexual play," and "atypical sexual practices" (Dimen 2 1, 2 17; Stein 1998, 2 8). I remain strongly opposed to these dignified and respectable phrases because they domesticate the otherness in perversion by registering "erotic strangeness but then [promptly] repress[ing it] via normalization" (Dean forthcoming). For further explanations and important qualifiers, see Saketopoulou 2 14, 2 19.

[25] See Lyng (2 4) for discussions of how extreme sports, art, use of psychedelics, and other non-sexual activities may also be such pathways; see also Newmahr 2 1 .

especially likely to be recruited by the sexual drive. First, sexuality in general is well suited for pursuing bodily thrills that come up against the limit because, even though sexuality is distinct from the sexual drive itself, it is also always infiltrated by it (Laplanche 2 11; Saketopoulou 2 17a; Scarfone 2 19ab). Sexual pleasure, as Bataillle puts it, "attains a wild intensity, an insanity" (1956, p. 137), that opens "directly out upon a certain vista of anguish, upon a certain lacerating consciousness of distress" (p. 139). Second, sexualities that are behaviorally perverse [that deviate, that is, in object (e.g. fetishism), or aim (e.g. sadomasochistic variants like BDSM) (Freud 19 5; Van Haute and Westerink 2 16, 2 17)) may be more likely for limit work because of their exquisite porosity to the rogue, deviant, and savage properties of the infantile sexual. Let me emphasize, though, this: the point of limit experience is not to shock or to omnipotently triumph over limits (Nigro 1995). Triumphing, after all, would be about mastering (binding) when the aim is not to buttress but to contest the ego (unbinding). If the practices more likely to perform limit work are scandalous or subversive, this is not for the sake of shocking itself, but because such exuberant sexualities are more likely to kindle the escalating economy of the sexual drive.[26] As such, we expect sexualities that twine arousal, humiliation, pleasure, risk-taking, subordination, abjection, dominance, and pain to be especially apposite contenders for limit work (Saketopoulou 2 15b). On this point we should heed Dean s caution, however, that "simply accept[ing] or, indeed, celebrat[ing] perverse sexuality" by folding it into an ego/identity structure, "may be a way of avoiding what is so intransigently difficult about [perversion]" (2 14, p. 269).[27]

Third, the kinds of repetitions secreted by trauma (Freud 1914) have the potential to innervate inciting traumatisms because of their economic affinity with the sexual drive. Freud, let s recall, described

[26] Samuel Delany s work is a particularly good illustration of work that rides the sexual drive not to jar or disturb (1973, 1974), but to describe, instead, the plenitudes of the sexual (see Jeremy O. Harris s interview of Samuel Delany in Fernandez, 2 2).

[27] "The danger" Dean continues "lies in how progressive politics encourages us to understand sexuality as a vital component of identity, thereby allowing us conveniently to forget . . .[that u]nderstood psychoanalytically rather than psychologically, sexuality remains alien to selfhood: sex is not the expression of identity but its undoing. Identity politics is no friends of psychoanalysis" (2 14, p. 27).

their economy as "more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle" (192 , p. 23), as if watching "some 'daemonic force at work" (p. 35; also, 1914, 1933). As inciting traumatisms, these repetitions no longer escalate out of compulsive frenzy but, rather, out of an acquired taste for the more and more of experience. Instead of being driven to reproduce themselves mechanically, they repeat for pleasure s sake routing them back to the pleasure principle. This is a consequential development because repetition that falls under the aegis of the pleasure principle is repetition that is rescued from the hopeless hamster wheel of recursion (Nyong o 2 1). Something new can be wrested out of it (Scarfone unpublished manuscript). Repetitions that become inciting traumatisms, thus, can offer paths to fresh experience. Animated by a taste for more (excitement, curiosity, etc.) they can be pleasurable and, indeed, usable; inserted into a scene of address (Reis 2 9; Scarfone 2 11; 2 19a) they may become "vehicle[s] of [their] own transcendence" (Reis 2 2 , p. 1 1). In this sense, clinical interventions that treat perverse pleasures as pathological can hamper repetition compulsions momentum towards being span into traumatisms that incite useful psychic work because they impede the building of momentum towards overwhelm. We will encounter the daemonic force of such repetitions in *Slave Play* and explore in depth in Part II how they can—or fail to—be spun into inciting traumatisms.

Blanchot (198) was especially interested in the contestation of the ego produced by limit experience, where things cannot be regulated or foreseen, where one s very existence may be felt to be at stake (Bataille 1928, 1954; Foucault 1991). He cautioned, however, against exaggerating our ability to exhaustively narrate what happens in these psychic spaces. A principled stance would require us to admit that we can t exhaustively describe it. In fact, for psychoanalysis to think and speak about such experiences, we, as analysts, will have to relinquish the gratification offered by precise description (binding)-which would amount to our own act of passibility. "Our efforts" wrote Foucault, who experimented with limit experience himself (Miller, 1993; Wade 2 19), "are undoubtedly better spent in trying to … mak[e this experience] speak from the depths of where its language fails … where the subject who speaks has just vanished" (1963, p. 77). If, as analysts, we permit ourselves the imprecision of speaking in approximations, we might say that

in limit experience/overwhelm, one finds oneself in the presence of the drive. Divested of its representational coating—the vesting, I remind us, having occurred through primary violence and translation—this is as bare and unmediated as the drive can be.

Overwhelm and limit experience cannot be planned or orchestrated. For Bataillle, they become "accessible through excess, not through want" (1954, p. 22), which means that the situation has to carry one over. To be carried over entails letting oneself become passible to the other (Lyotard 1988) and to the unknown.[28] Passibility "is the opposite of action" (Bataille 1954, p. 46), more like a lowering of an internal defensive, resistive barrier that seeks to keep things stable than something one actively does or implements. One enters such experiences without knowing where they will lead, but nevertheless involving oneself as a full participant, taking responsibility for oneself and for what the experience will rouse. What will ensue cannot be anticipated: that is the condition of possibility for overwhelm, and it is also the risk that comes with overwhelm.

Let us now return to Dean and his leather-capped stranger, whose intentions we never learn and Dean likely didn t either. As noted, their unscripted piss play scene could have gone off the rails, becoming traumatic. It didn t. Now, Dean does not tell us what followed this scene, so it may look like we can t know if his erotic astonishment developed the density of overwhelm. But we do know something of consequence. In "an arena of experimentation in which I was exclusively top" (p. 125), this stranger "made me his piss bottom" (p. 125). This is consequential: the breaking down of one s ordinary way of being in favor of something new and unexpected is akin to the ego s contestation. Dean s readiness to surrender himself to his stranger, the stranger who without consent urinated in Dean s mouth, but also to the stranger and to the strange in himself exposed him to something surprising. "I did not and would not have consented" he writes, and it is precisely what occurred beyond, though not against, his consent that animates his erotic astonishment. In being made into a "piss bottom" what matters most is not identity (i.e. that he bottomed as opposed to topped) but the quality of transitiveness.

[28] This, again, emphasizes that limit consent is not about inviting violation but about a loosening of one s defenses so that one can be transported to an elsewhere.

In polymorphous perversity pleasure "countermands the claims of identity" (Dean 2 12, p. 48), the key is not perversity but polymorphousness (Scarfone 2 14). When "identity becomes the law," explains Foucault, "[when] the perennial question is 'Does this thing conform to my identity?" (1984, p. 166), the ego speaks in banalities, seeking the reassurances of conforming to identity mandates rather than letting itself be carried into the unknown. In such instances, the ego cannot become "a source of initiative, [with] a capacity to intervene in a unique and original manner" (Scarfone, unpublished manuscript), but becomes, instead, an ossifying structure.

Polymorphousness seems to reign as well in Stockton who was able to pluck a queer pleasure from the signifier that dildoed her by inventively trying to take it "like a man." Stockton may have felt the pain of being screwed, but she related to it not through masochistic submission or rageful grievance but by crafting her own, idiomatic relationship to the signifier "lesbian," by crafting, that is, a new translation. She did so by lifting the signifier out of the conventional gendered frameworks in which it had been given to her through primary violence, and by establishing her own, polysemic meanings to it. We may, thus, go so far as to say that Stockton took the signifier more into her possession-even as the signifier will never fully belong to her, any more than any signifier ever fully belongs to any of us (Stockton 2 19).

Stockton s and Dean s vignettes are too brief for us to track overwhelm in its full excitement, impetus, or duress. While we know something about Dean s erotic astonishment, we are not privy to whether his or Stockton s experiences came "as close as possible to … that which can t be lived through" (Foucault 1997, p. 241). For that, we ll have to turn to *Slave Play,* and to the brilliant mind of Jeremy O. Harris.

PART TWO

1. Slave Play

> You should not work to make the audience comfortable with what they are witnessing at all.

–Jeremy O. Harris, *Slave Play* playwright, Notes on Style

So they fucked up and gave us a Broadway theater.
–Closing night, *Slave Play* Director Robert O Hara

Slave Play landed on the New York theater scene with a thunderclap igniting a panegyric round of reviews and a tide of celebratory appreciation for Jeremy O. Harris, its gifted 3 -year-old, queer, Black playwright. Deemed "one of the best and most provocative" new plays (Green 2 19), *Slave Play* delivered a "shot across the bow of the Great White Way" (*New York Daily Review* 2 19). The extensive commentary (see Holdren 2 19) focused on its artful portrayal of how White supremacy grates in the everyday[29] (Marks 2 19). But critics left mostly untouched the controversial aspects of the play regarding the erotics of interracial desire, and the implication that racism carries an erotic charge for all involved.[3] This isn t surprising: *Slave Play* engaged consent at its most gnarled site, at the especially difficult junction between sexuality and the traumas of the antebellum past.

Unfolding on a Southern plantation, the opening act stuns the audience with three interracial, psychosexual encounters involving nudity and vigorously simulated, on-stage sex. In the First Act, Kaneisha, a dark-skinned Black enslaved woman, is subjected to an erotically tinged scene of racial denigration by Jim, the White plantation overseer. Jim humiliates her calling her a "useless heffer" (p. 21), making her eat off the floor "like a dog" (p. 23), describing her twerking as "jigabooing" (p. 27), and referring to her as a "negress" (p. 51). Kaneisha does as he says while also challenging his authority, by asking questions like, "you actually want an answer to that?" (p. 22), making pronouncements like, "it ain t dirty in my estimation" (p. 23), and dissing him for being unable to tell apart a watermelon from a cantaloupe. Their exchange toggles between debasement and softs acts of irreverence.

[29] It is one of Whiteness s operations to understand everything as self-referential, but this play is not aimed at educating White people. Its goal is to problematize collective living in the shadow of America s original sin, chattel slavery (Dershowitz 2 19). This lack of address is not specific to *Slave Play*; the aesthetic is not addressed to us but to an other (Lyotard 2 2). While the artist may have an imaginary interlocutor in mind, the work is not intended to them personally. It is the us, the audience, that imagines that the message is specifically addressed to, and crafted for, us.

[3] See Frank, Romano and Grady 2 1 ; MacDonald 2 19 for rare exceptions.

Tension escalates, culminating in Jim forcing himself on her sexually. As the scene progresses, arousal mounts, and racial epithets multiply.

The second encounter depicts Alana, a White, dim-witted, and funny Southern mistress, commanding a handsome, mix-raced enslaved man, Philip, to play on "his little fiddle" (p. 3) some of that "mulatto magic" (p. 31) that makes the female slaves "hoot and holla … waiting to run on ya later" (p. 34). The word "fiddle" and Alana s intonation of it imply that the real instrument of Philip s magic is his penis. This marks the complex space Jeremy O. Harris wants his audience in: depersonalizing violence and eroticism don t belong to competing registers but are of kin.[31] Philip dutifully complies. Before long he finds himself face down on her bed. Alana proceeds to forcibly sodomize him with a sizable black dildo, an heirloom from her mother which, we find out, was given to her on her wedding night, her mother anticipating that her White husband would be unable to sexually please her.

In the third encounter, Gary, a Black plantation overseer, orders around Dustin, the White-passing indentured servant. When Gary oddly insists that he be referred to as "Nigger Gary" (p. 41), Dustin mocks citing his overseer s "White" comportment and manners.[32] The insinuation that Gary is not black enough leads to a physical altercation. As the two men wrestle, things veer erotic. Sexually inflamed, they strip each other down to their underwear. Dustin s already-thin servility falls off as he threatens Gary, "[I c]ould have you lynched for deigning to touch me like that … You can talk to me anyway you please. But when it comes to touch … I am Dustin The White" (p. 44).[33] Flexing his authority as overseer, Gary climbs atop a cotton

[31] The implication that Black men are well-hung and the historical fact that Black men were "hung from trees for being, well, hung" (Poulson-Bryant 2 5, p. 57) highlights that racialized violence is both brutal and erotic at the same time. While on the level of the ego, being reduced to a part object can feel offensive and injurious, in the domain of the sexual, it can be an erotic elixir, arousing enthralling appetites (Dean 2 8; Dimen 2 15).

[32] Dustin s mocking monologue is one of the most hilarious parts of the play. And as we, the audience, laugh, we are implicitly shown, and asked to (re)consider, what precisely we are laughing at when we unselfconsciously join in the hilarity of a "proper" Blackness from which Gary ostensibly deviates.

[33] From "lynching" to "calling the police" on "suspicious" Black people, Dustin s threat unmistakably parallels the present, referencing how easily White (and White-passing) people can endanger Black people s lives by involving law enforcement.

cart. Towering over Dustin, he orders him to get on his knees and lick his boot. Dustin readily complies, delivering a sensuous boot-licking that drives Gary to a spectacular orgasm. But then, vertiginously, and to Dustin s (and the audience s) surprise, Gary starts shaking, first slightly, then intensely. Gary eventually collapses into a tearful, hyperventilating puddle.

Briefly, we return to Jim who is raping Kaneisha. Momentum is building when Jim strangely mutters that he can t go on, and begins to lose his erection. Kaneisha is nearing climax when Jim interrupts her momentum, calls out "Starbucks"—first tentatively, then loudly and repetitively. We, the characters and the audience, hear a loud horn blast. Everything stops, ending the First Act.

Racial trauma and colorism pulsate through *Slave Play* s first act under the heavy burden of history and to the garish, clamorous accompaniment of guttural sexual moans. It s no wonder director Robert O Hara decided to withhold an intermission, rightly anticipating that anyone made uncomfortable by the demanding horrors of the first act (that is, almost anyone with a pulse), would be tempted to walk away.[34] The pairing of sex, trauma, and degradation played out through racial tropes is not easy to bear but, O Hara explains, if you go to see a play that calls itself *Slave Play*, "it should cost [you] something to watch it and to experience it" (Kai 2 19).

In the Second Act, we find the three couples sitting in the plantation home with two therapists and discover that what we just watched was day four of a therapy dubbed "Antebellum Sexual Performance Therapy." The Second Act has an immediate retroactive effect on our understanding of the First Act leading us to reshuffle its meaning. These consensual sexual encounters were intended to heal the Black partners sexual anhedonia: Kaneisha has lost sexual interest in Jim, Philip suffers from erectile dysfunction, and Gary has not orgasmed in months. The therapy, we are led to conclude, required the couples to act *as if* one were a master and *as if* the other were a slave. Scripted by the Black partners themselves, the sexual acts were meant for their pleasure—not the White partners , who spend the remainder of the play protesting having been made to do

[34] The lack of an intermission did not, of course, prevent it: offended theatergoers still got up and left during the First Act, and did so broadcasting their displeasure by passive aggressively gathering their belongings as if in slow motion before heading for the exit (see Daniels 2 19; Harris 2 19). For the most part, audience members who walked away were Black, a point to which I return later in this essay.

racist things against their will (but, as we will see, in accord with their desire). To those familiar with kink communities, this is a reference to *race play*, a controversial, albeit well-established, BDSM practice (Cruz 2 16; Weiss 2 13; Woolfe 2 16)—though not everyone in the audience is aware of this citation.[35] For the second act s remainder, the therapists help the couples explore the racialized dynamics in their erotic relationships.

The transition from the first act s pornodrama to the second act s jargon-filled metalevel—psychoanalysis, queer theory, and queer of color critique all play central roles—calms the agitation roused in the first act. This is because the move from the erotics of racist iconography to the language of psychotherapy and to the interrogation of race relations amounts to an economic shift: from less bound energy to a more bound state. Even as race is absolutely critical in America today, this resituating of the conversation in the sphere of racial identity moves us to more respectable and familiar territory. Further, the reveal that this was part of "therapy" allays the anxiety that someone has been violated against their will-restoring the sovereignty of affirmative consent.

The second act illustrates how the not-me quality (Sullivan 1953) of desirous disavowal rhymes with the logics of White supremacy. Despite their protestations, the second act reveals, the White and White-passing partners were not simply acting or "in role." Anyone paying attention notices that Jim, Alana, and Dustin were excited by the racialized/racist feelings they were asked to "perform."[36] Jim, for example, who keeps announcing that he didn t find the roleplay arousing at all and protests being "made to call [my wife] a negress" (p. 7), sported a visible hard-on through some of the first act. Of course, Jim s disavowing his arousal is also why he couldn t fully participate in the erotic play: his passionate

[35] In kinky communities, race play is considered to belong to a subgenre called *edgeplay*. The term edgeplay is used to denote sexualities that are risky and that court forces of sexuality and of memory, the force and impact of which cannot be anticipated ahead of time.

[36] The white members of the audience are implicated in this dynamic too; "[n]o one has forced anyone to see a play called *Slave Play*" O Hara points out, "[it s] your own interest, your own curiosity, other things bring you through the door" (Kai 2 19). Being told "you, after all, came to watch" is a searing indictment. And with the back wall of the set a giant mirror, we watch ourselves watch, our faces reflected from the stage, implying that we, too, are part of this slave play, as much as we might prefer to think otherwise.

thrusts became more inhibited after his racial slur (calling Kaneisha a "[n]egress" [p. 51]) sent her into a psychosexual intoxication. Losing his erection, he eventually safeworded[37] halting the sexual encounter just as Kaneisha was about to climax. In contrast, Alana announces that (play-)raping Philip "was just hot to me, really hot…" (p. 62), that her character "unlocked some doors, let me tell ya" (p. 63). Unlike Jim, Alana owns her arousal—but not that race was at play. Hence, her subsequent operatic outburst when Philip recalls that they met on FetLife – "like Tinder for fetish fiends" (p. 1 4)—to roleplay a cucking fantasy where Alana s White husband would "get off watching a black man fucking his white wife" (p. 1 5). "It wasn t racial, I swear" (p. 1 6) Alana wails, her histrionics escalating as she tries to draw a line between the FetLife role-play and that of the therapy; the roleplay, she claims, "had NOTHING to do with race, it was just what got *him* off" (p. 1 5). Dustin, too, strenuously protests post facto "what [Gary] made me do today" (p. 72), even as he clearly enjoyed the sex that drew its titillating charge from Gary being asked to be addressed as "Nigger Gary." The racial epithet, and Dustin s threat of lynching, played a key role in Dustin s arousal.

2. The Slave Play in *Slave Play*

That racism has an erotic charge for White people is not really new news. One need only reflect on the sexual undercurrents subtending the American history of lynching (Dray 2 3). But offering up this difficult but known fact is merely Jeremy O. Harris s theatrical feint; it is what allows him to move to what he is really after, which is something much more incandescent than calling Whiteness to task-the fact that the Black partners *solicited* these erotic indignations and the racial fetishization. The controversial claim mounted by *Slave Play* is that the erotic life of racism inflects not just the oppressors psychosexuality but also the oppressed s (Holland 2 12; Lindsey and Johnson 2 14; Musser 2 16; Stockton 2 6). These Black partners don t want to be respected, at least not in the conventional sense of the word. To the contrary, Kaneisha, Philip, and Gary are seeking experiences that mimic the

[37] A safeword is a code word agreed upon in advance by both parties to signal one s need to stop a BDSM scene. Harris s choice of "Starbucks" as the play s safeword deserves an essay unto itself.

atrocious history of chattel slavery *in the past*, to fuel spectacularly complicated intimacies *in the present*. These sexual pleasures don t readily line up with the logic of recognition, equivalence, and value (Muñoz 2 13).

It is not difficult to see why Harris detour via Whiteness was expedient: it is painful, if not explosive, to discuss a desire for sexual abjection, especially in the flammable territory of race. In this regard, *Slave Play* uses race as the proverbial Trojan horse through which charged, queer forms of desire are surreptitiously imported into dignified discursive spaces that would otherwise negate them. Here is queerness at its most complex, not as identity, but as affect and as aesthetic, queerness as pertaining not only to lust or intimacy but also to sexual desiring that conducts shame, injury, contempt, defiance, despair, and hate (Reid-Pharr 2 1). Here, we might say from a psychoanalytic perspective, is a combustible example of how the sexual drive s polymorphous perversity may annex traumatic history as its representational coating. The darker set of desires volitionally enacted by the Black partners marks how the *then* is conducted into the *now* and it is on this very thin strip between past and present that the slave play in *Slave Play* ricochets. Jeremy O. Harris offers, thus, an extended visitation, if not a vertiginous descent, into taboo and forbidden sexual appetites, into perversity that is "capable of stressing nearly every boundary required for the order of 'civilized society to hold" (English 2 1 , p. 73). Kaneisha, Gary, and Philip are not hoping to be recognized or to be offered what analysts problematically, as Khan (2 18) has suggested, understand as empathic witnessing; they want something else entirely, something that has more to do with pleasure and with the more and more of experience.

"The Shock of Gary Fisher": From Repetition Compulsion to Inciting Traumatism[38]

Jeremy O. Harris does not explicitly link Gary s character in *Slave Play* to the actual person of Gary Fisher, but the connection is too obvious to

[38] I borrow this phrase ("The shock of Gary Fisher) from Reid-Pharr s (2 1) chapter of the same title.

ignore.[39] Gary Fisher was a Black gay man who died of AIDS-related complications. His notebooks were published posthumously, and at his request, by his teacher, the famous queer theorist Eve Sedgwick. This strange compendium included extensive narrations of erotic fantasies/experiences revolving around his wish to be sexually dominated by a "white master."[4] His writings were received with unease, shock, and consternation. Fisher s enjoyment at wanting to be a White man s "nigger, your property and worshipping not just you, but your whiteness" (p. 231) confused and puzzled his readers. The strangeness of such desires operated like an enigmatic message, spurring many authors to theorize how the folding of the haunting traumas of slavery into someone s sexual complexion might extend beyond repetition compulsion (Musser 2 17; Nyong o 2 19; Scott 2 1 ; Sinfield 2 4; Stallings 2 15; Stockton 2 9; Woodard 2 14). [41]

Stretching to make sense of Fisher s desires, Jose Muñoz (2 13) described the impossibility of adjudicating between Black subjects seen as either frozen at the traumatic standstill of slavery s aftermath (what we would analytically understand as repetition compulsion) and a racialized sexuality that is fully of one s own accord (simply put, just what gets one off).[42] The incommensurable, he suggested, may be one site where sexuality twines with racial trauma. Of course, this is not to suggest that Fisher s (or Kaneisha s, Phillip s, and Gary s) desires for racial

[39] While *Slave Play* was playing on Broadway, the playwright wrote, produced, and performed in a new play under the handle GaryXXXFisher. That play, *Black Exhibition*, turned the heat even higher than *Slave Play* and included Harris reading excerpts from Gary Fisher s work (1996).

[4] Here are two characteristic excerpts: "I want to be a slave, a sex slave, a slave underneath another man s (… a big white man) power. I want to relinquish responsibility and at the same time give up all power" (1996, p. 187), and; "[s]exually I want (desire, fantasize myself) to be/being used. I want to be a slave, sexually and perhaps otherwise" (p. 199).

[41] Second-wave feminism struggled with a form of this question as well, heatedly debating in the 198 s desires that involved one s own sexual subjugation (Vance 1992). Why would a lesbian, for instance, engage in a butch-femme relationship or participate in sexual sadomasochism when these dynamics, the argument went, draw on the inequality of gender roles mapped onto patriarchal cruelties? See Musser 2 14 for a detailed accounting of these debates.

[42] Jennifer Nash s exquisitely careful and beautiful work on this precise tension point should be on our psychoanalytic radar (2 14).

debasement are universal to all, or even many, Black people. *Slave Play* makes no such homogenizing move. That these desires exist—among some real people and not just theatrical characters (see Cruz 2 16; Johnson 1999; Weiss 2 11; Woolfe 2 16), including in our practices (Saketopoulou, 2 18)—merely speaks to how they draw on the materiality of the crimes of slavery.

Such sexual appetites, *Slave Play* insists, do not necessarily leave "the historical bitterness of the past" on "the other side of the leather door (Johnson 1999). Jeremy O. Harris shows, instead, that erotic excitement can become painfully *and* pleasurably interdigitated with the signifiers of slavery s traumas. "It is to our detriment," Dean writes, "that we remain skeptical about pleasures that we regard as contaminated by power, as if … there are pleasures that are not contaminated by power" (2 12, p. 481). Not just power, but abuses of power, I would add, also get readily folded into sexual appetites (see Allison 1995; Angot 2 17; Anonymous 2 17). In *Slave Play* racial fetishism is shown to draw its erotic heft from the materiality of antebellum scars (Pérez 2 15) prompting us to ask: when the past blisters through present-day desire – i.e. when Gary asks Dustin to address him as "Nigger Gary," or when Kaneisha goes into sexual convulsions upon being called "a lazy, nasty Negress" — are we in the deadness of strict, traumatic repetition? Or might we, perhaps, be observing an inciting traumatism that is trying to build up momentum beyond a mere restaging of trauma towards a potentially transformative state of overwhelm? The pivotal difference, as discussed earlier, is the presence of pleasure. This pleasure may be insufferable but when it is suffered anyway, it may render the sexual slave play into something more than just a recursion orbiting around an intergenerational traumatic center marking, instead, something driven and unwilled (Bataille 1954) that swells beyond containment to acquire escape velocity, rendering it into a motor for fresh psychic work. To have a chance to become an inciting traumatism, such scenarios need to escalate even to the point of the monstrously extreme (as we ll see happening in the play s Third Act), to develop enough energetic momentum to rupture the ego s self-investment.

In this sense, we may understand psychoanalytically the racial fetishism in *Slave Play* as a point of high density, a highly represented sexual fantasy where the impersonal nature of the drive (Dean 2 9)—

impersonal in the sense that the drive lacks a preordained aim, has a penchant for exchangeable objects, and lacks an addressee—gets churned into sexual*ity*. Sexuality, let s remember, is the set of behaviors/acts/fantasies that we may think of as the representational ambassadors of the sexual drive (Scarfone 2 19a) and which, to acquire its psychic coating (representation) has to draw from the objets trouvés in the socius (Aulagnier 1975; Laplanche 1987, 2 15). Racial oppression and racist iconography can be taken up as translational codes, a take-up that is not random but meaningful and serendipitous at once. The signifying nexus of racial exploitation, rape, and, degradation can turn the impersonal property of the sexual drive into sexuality, rendering racial fetishization a site where the impersonal may get sutured to history s material effects. Racial fetishism, in that sense, does not just represent the past (i.e. it does not merely point to the history of abduction, exploitation, rape, and systematic dehumanization) but it re-presents it, in the sense that it presents again in actual time (Scarfone 2 15b). In the sexual present, this fusion, and the irresolvable tension on which it hinges, produce sexualities of the incommensurable, sexualities, that is, that solicit the future (Muñoz 2 13; Sinfield 2 4).

For some audience members—those who petitioned the play to be shut down,[43] and who vociferously voiced their upset on social media[44]—the play felt traumatic. For others it functioned as an inciting traumatism that put theatergoers in an especially demanding position, as we, too, are subjected to the repetition simply by observing it. This is akin to the position the analyst finds herself in the consulting room as well; not just observing but being subjected to, and thus, to some degree participating in, the patient s repetitions. At such junctures, it can be tempting to dismiss the iterative quality of inciting traumatisms. What would such dismissals look like? Trying, for example, to assimilate it into familiar understandings, deciding, for instance, that these desires are pathological or by resisting the disturbance the play creates. Or by resisting the novelty suggested by the play by, for instance, getting up and walking out of the theatre or "cancelling" the playwright. Assimilating the new into the old is, as we have seen, how the ego barricades itself

[43] https://www.change.org/p/abernalwbrc-yahoo-com-shutdown-slave-play

[44] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LMw5Jm503gM&feature=youtu.be&t=1253

against the turbulences that come with novelty. Turning away from novelty also issues from the wish to spare the other—Philip, Gary, and Kaneisha—from the horrors of repetition. However well-meaning, this impulse obtains from liberal notions of agency, notions that are rooted in the fantasy that a subject scarred by trauma can be restored to its pretraumatic state. Interventions that stem from such liberalism may problematically interrupt the momentum required to reach the overwhelm state, stripping repetition from its quest for pleasure, consigning it to a mere re-cycling of trauma. This is, in fact, what occurs when Jim safewords and why Kaneisha is both heartbroken and enraged with him. His halting their sexual encounter seemed motivated, at least consciously, by seeing only the woundedness in Kaneisha s desire. Jim was unable to appreciate was that her wound had also acquired a taste for pleasure. His inability to see that her excitement as anything but historical injury detracted from her creative endeavor to do racial pleasure differently constituting, in effect, its own violence.

How do we know, though, that in *Slave Play* we may be in the domain of a potential inciting traumatism and not of rote, mechanical repetition? Because Dustin and Philip were deeply and uniquely pleasured by their lustful encounters. During the "forced" sodomy slave scene, Philip overcomes his erectile dysfunction, "[n]ot with a pill but with, um … [w]ell our improv … " (p. 64). Notably, the sexual scene with Alana triggers Philip s memory of having met first met her to enact a sexual cucking fantasy. "I could feel his eyes," Philip says, about Alana s husband "seeing me as a nigger, a big ol nigger on top of his white wife" (p. 1 7). In the après-coup, Alana s husband s gaze becomes traumatic for Philip; it feels racial in a way it didn t before. This spawns a transformation of Philip s relationship to himself. Where he earlier saw himself as "just a hot guy who s not exactly black or white" (p. 93), Philip comes to inhabit his Blackness differently: "[h]ow am I just hearing myself say this?" (p. 1 6), he exclaims in surprise. Although on the level of identity, this clarifies things, on the level of the sexual, things are no less vexed or tangled. An earlier memory emerges: White classmates see Philip naked in the shower, his penis "swinging," and call Philip "donkey dick" (p. 93). This moment of racial objectification, of reducing a person to a body part, trailed by a long racist history, is wounding. And yet, insofar as it simultaneously gestures to a corporeal sexuality

overbrimming with potency and virility, these denigrations also establish Philip s sexual superiority, and splendor (see Poulson-Bryant 2 5). This is the both/and of sexualized racial humiliation. "[M]aybe," Philip says, straining at this tense pairing, "that s why my dick worked more. Maybe my dick only works when I know I am black" (p. 1 6).

Similarly, Gary so enjoyed the encounter that he climaxed for the first time in months. The phrase "Gary came" is, in fact, the laugh line on a loop throughout Act Two, as if Harris wants to ensure we don t lose sight of the sexual play s yield. Gary s orgasm, like Dean s experience of erotic astonishment, is gorged with pleasure. But insofar as it s followed by a hyperventilating collapse, it is more like the experience of overwhelm: pleasuring and anguishing at once. It is this state that galvanizes the psychic work we watch Gary do in Act Two, leading him to a powerful insight: "for almost a decade I ve given myself over to you" he says to Dustin, "who acts like he is the prize and I am the lucky recipient. No motherfucker, I am the prize" (p. 113). In this powerful elongated moment, we witness a hard-earned transformation that required the suffering of pleasure leaving Gary with a reconfigured sense of self-and questioning his relationship with Dustin.

Sites of Woundedness as Sexual Sites

For the traumatized subject there is no return to a pre-traumatic state, to a liberal form of agency that is not constrained by the past s wounding effects (Keizer 2 4; Musser 2 14, 2 17).[45] Projects of restored freedom and of radical psychic emancipation are fantastical constructions existing only in the minds of those unwilling to concede that trauma has irremediable scarring effects. I make a plea, thus, to us as analysts to be less preoccupied with what to do *about* trauma and to become more interested in what subjects can do *with* trauma, to shift, that is, psychoanalysis traumato-phobic stance to a traumato-philic one. What is, at best, on offer for traumatized subjects are not liberatory outcomes but

[45] I have argued throughout this essay that a liberal form of agency (e.g. affirmative consent), that is unconstrained by trauma, is impossible for any subject since the unconscious is constituted to begin with through the trauma of implantation (Laplanche 1987). This is even more pronounced for subjects who have also toiled through historical and structural trauma; Musser has aptly called such fantasies of liberal agency "white fantasies" to mark how they are always already racialized (2 16).

more degrees of freedoms. Attaining them involves crafting one s own, personal relationship to the terms the socius has made available to us through primary violence and the mythosymbolic (remember here Stockton s revamped relationship to the signifier that screwed her). For Black people and for people of color, such self-defining includes not having to conform to White people s narratives about them, and understanding themselves despite White people s charitable and, thus, potentially condescending "concerns" about what s "really" agentic. In *Slave Play* we see how such protectionism is fueled by White liberalism, which is nothing more than the ego s investment in how it is perceived (i.e., the "good white person" [Sullivan 2 4]). Jim, for example, interrupting the racially humiliating scenario that Kaneisha wanted and, more precisely, needed, protests having been made to "call her a negress [when]" he emphasizes, "she is my queen"[46] (p. 7). On the conscious level, he is defending her dignity, but in appointing himself as her defender, he is also steadfastly holding onto the power of being the one who determines the precise coordinates of what is, and is not, dignifying to her as a Black woman.[47] Kaneisha is, thus, disallowed from her own relationship to her sexuality, and impeded in her invest her trauma with pleasure, which could spin it into an inciting traumatism. Jim s refusal follows on a long history of Black people being refused the prerogative, and the pleasure, of their own self-understandings and is, in large part, how enslaved Black people were made into chattel; by being told, for instance, that their bodies were too unruly, their music too devilish and that both were in need of White peoples civilizing influence. Efforts to wrest something new from repetition, to make something old and traumatic one s own, involve taking the signifiers more into one s possession. This is how a word as loaded and as historically distended as a racial slur can paradoxically become a site of enlarged freedom-work (*such use, of course, can only be mobilized by those against whom the word has been leveled*). The sexual, unwilled and overbrimming, pushes beyond identity categories, beyond the ego s binding and beyond its consent, engaging desires

[46] Protesting too much, thus, Jim stumbles against another racial stereotype. A psychoanalytically informed theatergoer sees this coming.

[47] See Skerrett (2 11ab) and Saketopoulou (2 11) for a discussion regarding sexuality, dignity, and consent.

that do not yield to the mandates of political correctness or to the Orwellian censorship of good politics.

Enlarged freedoms also involve not having to carry the burden of representing one s entire race, to not succumbing to the "flattening" effects (Musser 2 14) of speaking for all Black people (see also Collins 2 ; Nash 2 14, 2 19). Note, for example, that in reading Gary Fisher, McBride reports that what made him cringe was not Fisher s desires, but "the public nature of his declarations, the fact that they … did not ascribe to the 'positive representation of black life, or of black gay life, that we have been so thoroughly programmed to respect, revere, and … produce" (2 5, p. 98). We would do well to keep in mind Dean s (2 8) reminder here that sexual fantasy, and, I would add, sexual arousal, do not answer to political politics, however progressive and advancing of human rights they may be. BDSM race play activist mike bond makes a similar point: "When walking into a BDSM club" he highlights, "black people are always black first … our behavior is always measured against those definitions of what a black person is supposed to do" (personal communication). Mollena Williams, a Black submissive woman who calls herself a "perverted negress" (mollena.com) and who lives in a 24/7 dominant/submissive relationship with a White man (Wolfe 2 16), writes: "My vagina isn t really interested in uplifting the race … what pussy wants is really dark stuff to test the boundaries and cut with an exhilarating level of danger" (quoted in Cruz 2 16, p. 62). Such transformative moves involve stepping away from what Aulagnier calls "ambient discourses" (1975) where one says what one is expected to say; they involve assuming responsibility for what one wants even though that want is underwritten by the press of the sexual unconscious, a force one neither chooses nor controls, and indifferent to our consent. For someone to say about their sexuality: "I want what I want," or "I belong to a group but I am not answerable to it" is a frightening step, especially when the group shares a collective past of exploitation and oppression that continues to the present.

Engaging such complex dynamics is no small ask. It can be a roaring success and an excruciating failure, often both at once. In the Third Act, we find ourselves in Kaneisha s and Jim s bedroom, with Kaneisha packing her bags about to leave him. His refusal to engage her, (his safewording) has made the relationship untenable. On the level of affirmative

consent, her charge is unacceptable; Jim should not have to do something he doesn t want to. But we are not in the terrain of safety. We are "in the wake" of trauma (Sharpe 2 16), in the terrain of risk, in the weeds of crafting something new: in the territory, that is, of limit consent. Jim s unwillingness to become passible to Kaneisha, to let himself be carried by his own racialized sadomasochism and by the situation will no longer do; he has been more invested in being a "good white partner" than to visiting with her the harrowing vaults of their shared ancestral history. Let me clear that Jim is not being asked to kindly help Kaneisha with her trauma. Antebellum (and colonial) history is not the history of the trauma of Black people (or people of color) alone, but the history of the *traumatic relationship* between White people (and/or colonizers) and Black people (and/or the colonized). What is ultimately required of Jim, thus, is to lower his defenses to come into contact with the fact of his *own* ancestral past, which is that he comes from a lineage of oppressors. It is this history that Jim resists, a history to which he did not consent but with the ramifications he, nevertheless, has to live. And it is the rousing of this history that courses through him in what comes next.

While Kaneisha angrily recounts to him how he failed her Jim, for the first time, really listens. Giving himself over to the moment, he startles her—and us. "Shut up, you dirty negress" (p. 13) he screams at her in a thick Southern accent. Spoken in a stentorian voice, the offensive command pierces the theatrical space and the gravity of what s occurring astounds the audience: Jim is no longer just playing along. He has allowed something to be roused in him. "You are a nasty little bed wench who s been asking for this all day, ain tcha?" (p. 13) he says, pulling out a whip. His sadism, which is paradoxically conditioned by his having surrendered to Kaneisha, involves his relinquishing his identity stakes (on being the good White partner). Grabbing her violently he climbs on top of her, spreads her legs and plunges forward. The as-if rape that follows, and to which Kaneisha signals her agreement, is delivered to the pitch of an actual violation. Entirely uninhibited now in his racial slurs, Jim clutches her throat as he thrusts into her. Is this what Kaneisha really wanted, one wonders from the audience. Kaneisha starts resisting, scratches him, forcefully pushes him back, and lets out a chilling shriek. As she calls out her safeword, "Starbucks, Starbucks," she is wrecked, her

entire body convulsing in tears. The encounter is extraordinarily intense, disturbing, and confusing to watch. The dynamics of overwhelm, the not not-rape (Schechner 1985) scene suggests, are not easily worked out. And they do not reward Jim, Kaneisha, or the audience, with some exceptional clarity. Startled by Kaneisha s reaction, and uncertain about why he did what he did, Jim appears ruined. He takes a look at himself in the mirror and, upon encountering his reflection, vomits. Kaneisha strangely composes herself. It s not clear what is happening when, just before the play ends, she looks at the audience and says—to us? to him? to herself?—"Thank you for listening" (p. 132). It is left to the audience to try to discern whether this is genuine gratitude, bitter irony, or sardonic rage.

The stage directions regarding the delivery of this closing line read: "The actress playing Kaneisha does whatever she feels is right before looking at him [Jim]" (p. 132). This is the only place in the script where the actress playing Kaneisha is distinguished from the character of Kaneisha. And it is Jeremy O. Harris at his most brilliant. Why? Because in this moment, as the play ends, he recognizes that the human being playing Kaneisha s role needs a way out of being crushed by the scene. The instruction to deliver these lines *doing whatever she feels is right for her* in that particular moment incites the actress to translate—in the Laplanchean sense—the work of the last line in the way she needs to, bringing the anguishing scene to a close in her own emotional idiom.

The Third Act brings the audience as well to a state of overwhelm from which, we too, have to work to recover. Having already seduced us into lowering our defenses, the play exacts from the audience a strange kind of participation, working on us at the limits of our consent, pressing us into discomfort while also having transfixed us through its humor and its aggression, an aggression that has been specifically sexual. One leaves the theatre confused as to what one has just watched, disturbed by the intensity of the affect, and unclear as to what happens next. Did we witness a redemptive victory over a historical trauma? A successful sublimation? A pathetic reenactment of something ultimately unacceptable? The closing act refuses to soothe us. The play comes to a screeching halt at the place of maximum tension, that of the audience s unbinding. This is an offering of great integrity that only art and traumatic life can

muster: bodies, trauma, and the sexual produce inconsistencies and incoherencies of messy origins and of uncertain futures.

Slave Play stages one iteration of how sexuality can coagulate in relation to traumatic history. By repurposing history s iconographies to be repeated not in stale recursion but in the service of pleasure, sexuality can yield risky states of overwhelm that may transform previously inert and static meanings. Are Kaneisha, Gary, and Philip, ultimately better off? What have they gained through their seeming consensual mistreatment? Philip and Gary seem to have gained something, but we can t be certain for Kaneisha. Still, for none of them is some fantastical restoration at work, there is no redress or purging of the injurious past. To imagine that Kaneisha, Philip, or Gary would find a way out of racism s press through their sexualities overwhelm is overreach; slavery s intergenerational hauntings cannot be repaired. But they also need not only admit of singular narratives. What we can hope for is an upcycling of signifying materials already in circulation so that they be may reassembled into new configurations. "Probably any sexuality," writes Sedgwick, "is a matter of sorting, displacing, reassigning singleness or plurality, literality or figurativeness to a very limited number of signifiers … [to] a small repertoire of organs, orifices and bodily products" (1996, p. 284). This is another way of saying that new translations will still traffic in the same signifiers, they will still draw on the same restricted and, thus, restrict*ive*, repertory of materials for their re-translations (Aulagnier 1975; Laplanche 1987). Even if not redemptive, such partial solutions are likely vitalizing because they are of one's own crafting, bringing them more into the subject s possession.

The idea that the woundedness of the flesh (Spillers 1987) can recruit the spasms of desire and, in so doing, move someone from being bound in the past[48] to becoming a subject *with* a past may feel counterintuitive. So, too, might the proposition that a desire for intimate subjugation may open up transformative possibilities. The wild and savage elements of the sexual unconscious pair up with atrocious history, manifesting in a series of interlocked contradictions: humiliating but dignifying, selfish but generous, explicit but veiled, daring but cowardly, tender but cruel. The matter of how traumatized bodies can make bids to soften

[48] This is what Scarfone (2 15b) calls *the unpast*.

the grasp of histories to which they did not consent, but to which they are nevertheless subject, is that complex. And it is that urgent.

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