

CHAPTER SEVEN

White Slavery

I am thirty-five years old, mentally and physically normal. Among all my relatives, in the direct as well as in the lateral line, I know of no case of mental disorder. My father, who at my birth was thirty years old, as far as I know had a preference for voluptuous, large women. Even in my early childhood, I loved to revel in ideas about the absolute mastery of one man over others. The thought of slavery had something exciting in it for me, alike whether from the standpoint of master or servant. That one man could possess, sell or whip another, caused me intense excitement, and in reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (which I read at about the beginning of puberty) I had erections. Particularly exciting for me was the thought of a man being hitched to a wagon in which another man sat with a whip, driving and whipping him.

—Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*

In spring 2004 [after the photographs of torture at Abu Ghraib were circulated], I read a scene report—a written description of a consensual BDSM play scene—in the Janus newsletter. The scene took place at a San Francisco dungeon in late March 2004. It was

an interrogation scene, involving a colonel, a captain, a general, and a spy. The spy was hooded, duct-taped to a chair, and slapped in the face. As she resisted, the spy was threatened with physical and sexual violence, stripped naked, cut with glass shards, vaginally penetrated with a condom-sheathed hammer handle, force-fed water, shocked with a cattle prod, and anally penetrated with a flashlight. The scene ended when the spy screamed out her safeword [the signal that the scene was no longer consensual] “Fucking Rumsfeld!”

—Margot Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure*

When I sent Johnny a first draft of this essay in 2015, he wrote back to say that he thought I had not properly understood the role of SM in the social scene I was describing. While I had interviewed one African man who had in fact related his role in SM scenarios with white visitors, Johnny was correct: I had placed the man under the rubric of the computer scams in which he was involved rather than in relation to SM.¹

As my relationship with Johnny deepened, it emerged that he himself had been seriously involved in SM, as early as his college days. As time went on, however, he felt increasingly alienated from the SM scene in the United States. It had somehow lost its “authenticity,” he said. Indeed, his travels to Atlantic Africa were, in some ways, a response to that perceived loss.

In addition to our numerous conversations, Johnny sent me four photographs that he had copied from the profile of an African master posted to the European gay website I have already described. He assumed that the photographs had come from the neighborhood in which he lived or nearby. These images, more than any of Johnny’s words, even those that described the

most intimate of details, transformed my understanding. All four photographs involved the same African master with the same white slave. The face of the master, a heavyset black man of maybe thirty-five, was clearly visible in some of the shots, but the face of his gray-haired and balding white slave, perhaps in his fifties, was obscured.

Had the slave requested the photographs as a memento of his visit? And then the master discovered his own purposes for the pictures? Or had it been the other way around? Or was it some collaboration from the very beginning, a part of the erotics of the interaction? Clearly the photographs had taken some preparation to produce. The slave was naked except for a basic tunic such as one might see in a movie about Roman slaves. The locales were rural, either in thick forest or in a distinctly African field. The master wore his street clothes.

One image in particular held my attention. The white slave, sketched in Figure 5 overleaf, head down, facing the viewer, was wielding a traditional African hoe in a rural field, chained to his African master, who was “driving” him with a whip from behind. And observing from the other side of the picture were two skinny boys, in their late teens perhaps. This image captured, at the same time, an act that was erotic, clearly for the slave and perhaps for the master; an image that could be used to recall that arousal and reproduce it, both for the original participants and for others; and finally, a kind of local classroom on white erotics.

The photographs sent me to the literature on SM. The ethnography of what is now broadly called BDSM in the West, bondage-domination-sadism-masochism, has just begun. It holds unusual challenges. I have found sociologist Staci Newmahr’s ethnography, *Playing on the Edge*, of a pansexual SM scene in a large northeastern American city particularly insightful.

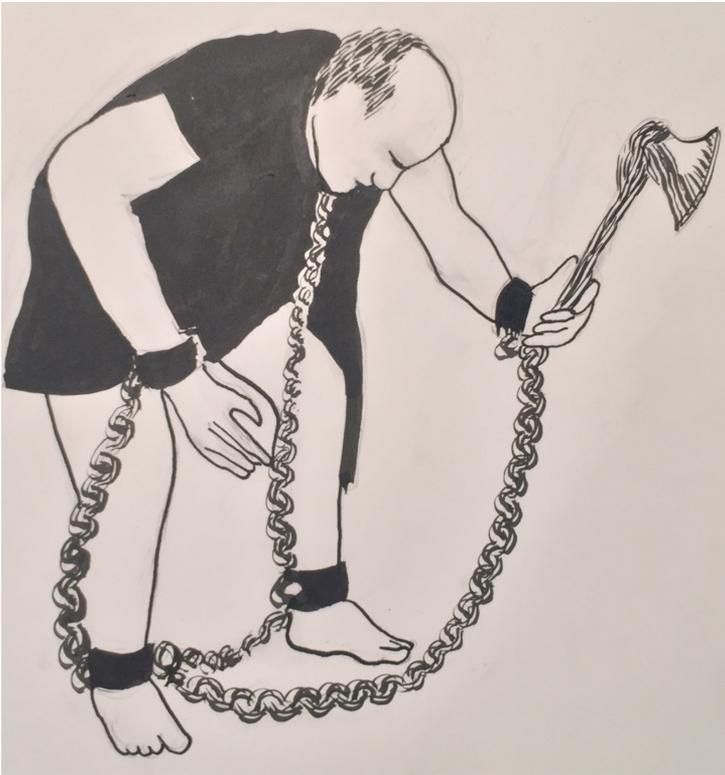


Figure 5. A sketch of the central figure of a white slave from a photograph attached to an African Internet profile. Not shown (to the left and behind) are the African slave driver and (to the right and behind) two African boys observing the scene.

Her reflections on her own bodily sensations during and after SM scenes were revelatory. Newmahr (2011, 18) defines SM as “the collection of activities that involve the mutually consensual and conscious use, among two or more people, of pain, power, perceptions about power, or any combination thereof, for psychological, emotional, or sensory pleasure.” She insists that SM is neither simply an alternative sexual practice, for everyone, nor role play, for everyone (2011, 60).

Rather, she puts dominance/submission at one pole of SM and pure “pain play” at the other. D/s clearly depends upon role play and is typically highly eroticized. Pain play, on the other hand, according to Newmahr, can be independent of both role play and sexual arousal. Whether the value of these distinctions will be confirmed by further research, I do not know. It is noteworthy, however, that Newmahr’s distinctions more or less mirror those of Tomkins, of which Newmahr seems to have been unaware:

Sexual sadism consists in the conjoint heightening of anger, excitement, and joy, as well as sexual pleasure. Sexual masochism is the mirror image of such a complex, in which one ordinarily identifies with the role of *both* victim and victimizer. There is usually, though not necessarily, a collusion between sadomasochistic partners such that double identification is shared at the same time that each also plays a distinctive complementary role. They need each other to share the total scene *and* to play distinctive roles of angry aggressor who inflicts pain and victim who suffers pain. Humiliation and degradation may, in addition, be conjoined with pain and suffering. If so, the sadist is excited by his disgust and or contempt of the self and of the to-be-degraded other, and the masochist is excited by the identification with the contempt of the other and by the experience of being hurt, disgusted, humiliated, and degraded. Some sadomasochistic sexual relationships may magnify humiliation primarily rather than the infliction of pain, with or without anger. The texture of sadomasochistic sexuality varies therefore with the ratios of anger and humiliation, excitement and enjoyment, and sexual pleasure versus inflicted pain. (Tomkins 1995, 202)

For my purposes, both of these authors are useful in introducing African SM, which appears to me more focused on the erotics of dominance and submission than on the infliction of pain.

That African SM exists at all is, of course, something of a surprise. I know of no prior report of its existence. After all,

slavery as a social institution remains a touchy topic in much of present-day Atlantic Africa. As Kopytoff and Miers (1977) explained in a classic analysis, African slavery, unlike New World varieties, typically incorporated slaves into local lineages and kin groups—over varying lengths of time and with different degrees of lingering stigma. To refer to matters of slave descent in the present, particularly in public, reflects, at the very least, bad manners (Holsey 2008). In this context, the foreignness of Europeans and their obliviousness to such concerns seem to have allowed a different approach to “slavery.”

Also striking is the seeming open-mindedness of Africans. This occurs at a time when most gay Europeans and North Americans themselves, not to mention others, continue to view SM as “weird,” if not “sick.” The development of lesbian SM communities in the United States in the 1970s, for example, produced an enormous backlash from some feminists (see Rubin 2011). And as late as 1987 in Great Britain, a case of consensual SM was legally prosecuted as assault. Likewise, in the United States, “In 2000, a police raid of a private party in Attleboro, Massachusetts, resulted in arrests on assault charges, despite the fact that no alleged victims pressed charges” (Newmahr 2011, 7).

Why was the African reaction to SM different? It was, I believe, the very nature of extraversion that allowed Africans to contemplate sexual practices quite unlike their own with little apparent disgust or shame (often the reaction, after all, to others’ fetishes). The point was to use their relationships with powerful outsiders to accomplish internal cultural goals. To accomplish this, Africans turned themselves into pure ethnographers, learning how to apprehend the world from an external point of

view, one uncontaminated by their own moralisms (which continued, of course, to be applied in other contexts).

From the other side of the relationship, why were Europeans drawn to Africa as a site for SM? One can construct various beginnings for SM. Anthropologist Paul Gebbard (1976, 165–66) pointed out that sadomasochistic practices seem to occur only in highly stratified societies with developed forms of symbolic mediation like literacy. As words, sadism and masochism were coined by Krafft-Ebing at the end of the nineteenth century—after the novels of the Marquis de Sade and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch had made their marks. And Freud ([1925] 2000, 25) noted what he believed was the composite character of sadomasochism (an argument disputed, for example, by Deleuze): “The most remarkable feature of this perversion is that its active and passive forms are habitually found to occur together in the same individual. A person who feels pleasure in producing pain in someone else in a sexual relationship is also capable of enjoying as pleasure any pain which he may himself derive from sexual relations.”

For Western gay men, the story begins after World War II in the development of what began to be called leathersex.² Not all men in leather communities were devoted to SM, but SM defined perhaps its core. At that point, the overwhelmingly dominant definition of a male homosexual focused on his supposed effeminacy, and indeed gay men themselves, as shown by Esther Newton (1972) in her brilliant analysis of drag queens, not infrequently cultivated flamboyantly effeminate styles.

By the mid-1950s, an emerging network of gay men in New York and Los Angeles began to reject this way of being gay and to adopt hypermasculine styles.³ This development was

institutionalized in so-called “leather communities,” in which masculine men sought out other masculine men, networks united by a certain rebellious form of brotherhood that was socially focused in urban bars and motorcycle clubs.

Hard, black shiny leather—whether in motorcycle jackets, caps, tight-fitting chaps and pants, or heavy workman’s boots—became the defining fetishes.⁴ And for a core of the men—though not for all—SM and other forms of kinky sex became a deeply meaningful part of their lives. By the 1970s, this new erotic constellation of gay masculinity, leather fetishism, and hard-core SM had spread not only to other American cities like San Francisco and Chicago but also abroad to Sydney and London, Amsterdam and Berlin. It is perhaps not surprising that leathermen’s quest for the masculine eventually led some to black men—who, as we have seen, had long been masculinized by the Western semiotics of race.⁵

Consider perhaps the most famous gay SM novel ever published, *Mr. Benson*, written by John Preston for serialization in *Drummer Magazine* in the late 1970s. The back cover blurb of the 1983 edition summarizes the plot: “Jamie wears his tightest jeans to the leather bar and makes sure the handsome, unsmiling top across the room gets a good view of his assets. But this is no ordinary leatherman, no weekend daddy: this is Mr. Aristotle Benson. Lucky Jamie is about to get an education and to begin his journey from a cute but forgettable clone to a compliant, hard-bodied slave, sensitive to his Master’s every glance and gesture.”

Mr. Benson, a wealthy white New York master, shares his slaves with other masters—two black masters in particular, Tom and Brendan. The latter is a policeman who lives in Harlem with a white slave named Rocco. Below, Jamie, the slave protagonist of the novel, talks with Rocco:

I was desperate to compare notes. “What’s it like, Rocco?”

“It’s hell, just hell. Sometimes he’ll bring home that other guy Tom.” I nodded to show him I knew who Tom was. “Well, they’ll break into the house and they’ll start this game thing that they’re living in that period. I have to figure out what it is and who I’m supposed to be. It’s always something racial. Like last week they came in and they were making like we were in Africa and that I was a white slaver they had captured. They were supposed to be tribal chiefs. Brendan put on this real heavy, real primitive music. And they were wearing African clothes. They used my body to make up for all the African children that had ever been sold off to America as slaves.

“And another time Brendan brought by these four other cops. They were all black and all had dicks that could kill you. They make believe I was a dope pusher who was selling heroin in the ghetto and ruining the lives of black teenagers. They took their revenge by gang-banging me, one after another, till each one had fucked me at least twice. I was bleeding for days.

“He’s always pulling things like that, Jamie. Every night when we listen to the news, if there’s anything on the tube that tells about a white person doing something to a black person, I get it—I get fucked, or he ties me up and goes to find people to work me over, or he’ll take me to a back room bar where I have to suck off every single black person there.” (Preston 1983, 81–82)

Tongue-in-cheek complaint, this fantasy illustrates how the actual history of power can condition, through reversal and redefinition, the constitution of the erotic.

A similar structure of feeling is recorded in the sex diary of white Samuel Steward, a tattoo artist in Oakland, California, in the late 1950s: “Most of all at present . . . I enjoy [the black body-builder] Bill Payson . . . It is his attitude of semi-cruelty, you might say, that I like; not cruelty exactly, but more a feeling of ‘This is what you deserve, white boy, you scorn me because I’m

a nigger, and here I am . . . that'll show you what I think of you” (Spring 2010, 246).

Biman Basu argues that it was the consumption of nineteenth-century slave narratives from the American South that, through reversal, structured many twentieth-century European SM scenarios. The original impulse for the creation of slave narratives was, of course, quite different. Henry Louis Gates Jr. has shown how it was the very act of writing that was being used to illustrate the modern personhood of slaves, their interiority and rationality, just like whites. Therein lay the moral monstrosity of slavery. But once abstracted into symbolic discourse, signifiers could float. They could be transformed and reversed to serve other, imaginative uses.

In addition to the devices, instruments, and methods [of punishment of Southern slaves], certain episodes are repeated in both the slave narratives and in sadomasochistic narratives. One such episode is having a slave whipped by another. Both masters and mistresses sometimes employed others to administer corporal punishment. When a “gentleman wishes his servants whipped, he can send him to the jail and have it done . . .” If she does not wield the whip herself, a mistress has a slave whipped when the slave “displeased her”. . . “Many mistresses will insist,” after having a slave flogged, on the slave’s “begging pardon for her fault on her knees, and thanking her for the correction.” (Basu 2012, 39–40)

Unlike gay romance, the advent of SM in Johnny’s neighborhood seems to have depended entirely on the coming of the Internet. Now, Africans had access to voluminous materials on the intricacies of the semiotics of SM, and they could demonstrate, through easily reproduced photographs, their own command of its theater.

Africans advertised as both slaves and masters on the Internet. Did masters learn their trade by first being slaves? Slaves in

their Internet profiles invariably recounted the discipline of past masters: “This boy has experience as a BDSM slave to four Masters so far. Sir, it is strong, muscular and available to serve all of Master’s needs. It can serve you while you travel here, visit you at home for a trial, or stay forever if you wish to keep it forever.” Such presentations of self demonstrated some insider knowledge of SM conventions (but probably not much real experience). *Master* is capitalized, *slave* is not. A slave is referred to as *it*. And a master is addressed as *Sir*.

Given the history of the Atlantic slave trade, one might think that what Europeans devoted to SM were after in Africa was verisimilitude, the added frisson of having a *black* slave. And indeed this may have appealed to a few. But ironically—or perhaps not—it was far more common for Europeans to come to Africa looking for a master, not a slave.

And African masters, in response, typically presented themselves in their Internet profiles as the zenith of animal-like, racialized masculine power—in a remarkable reading of just what white slaves wanted:⁶ “A jail that is a dominion of sexual darkness where you will be condemned to be made the humiliated helpless victim in the orgy of naked mass rape that takes place every night, where you will be hanged on your wrists and tied up on your back with widened thighs or simply get dragged to the ground or to my bed where hundreds of those hot black animals spread your legs and make sodomy-sex . . .” The grammatical mistakes—whether intended or not—probably heightened this master’s “authenticity” to European and North American readers.

That a much greater demand for masters than slaves exists in leather communities is a recurrent joke. Tom Magister (quoted in Thompson 1991, 91) only half-seriously wrote: “The general

consensus in the Leather Community is that there are about ten slaves for every Master. If you factor in the men who switch roles from Master to slave and back again, the ratio gets higher. As for men who are exclusively Masters, they are a fondly remembered breed.”

Magister was playfully exaggerating, presenting himself as the last of a dying breed, the top who never bottomed. So when the more earnest sociologist G. W. Levi Kamel addressed the same question, he wrote, “Leathermen themselves agree that participants prefer the passive role by approximately three to one” (T. Weinberg and Kamel 1983, 173). Some African men undoubtedly were “switches.” But there can be no doubt about which role was in greater demand in Africa or which held the greater reward.

I was able to interview one African master, a rather unattractive man in his late thirties with something of a potbelly. Unlike others, he presented himself as little interested in romance. “I’m a scammer,” he said. He was involved in various forms of Internet schemes, some involving credit card numbers. The scam he carried out on gay Internet sites involved the promise of a live sex show via his videocam. He insisted that anyone interested had to provide payment up front. After collecting money at the local Western Union, he typically never signed on to his computer at the designated time. But once or twice he actually carried through on this scheme and hired two younger, more attractive men from the neighborhood to perform sex online. When the men’s families found out, they took the scammer to a traditional form of dispute settlement and demanded that he pay restitution—which he did.

I had asked to speak to the man because I was interested in scammers. But in the middle of the interview, unbidden, he

recounted how he had been visited by a slave from Germany. He had played the master, keeping the man caged in his house during the day and having rough sex at night. As he told the story, his face lit up for the first time. It was clear that he had thoroughly enjoyed himself.

I conducted this interview, like others, in an outdoor café in the middle of the afternoon, when few other patrons were around. At some point, I typically offered to buy my interlocutor a drink. Some chose a soft drink. Some preferred beer. Before I could offer, the scammer called the waiter over and ordered the most expensive meal on the menu—for which I ended up paying. I was reluctant to protest since I had felt an I'm-going-to-take-advantage-of-you undercurrent throughout the interview. In many ways, scamming seems to have provided perfect training for being a master: the ability to convey, as an actor might, a feeling to an audience—in this case, a sense of threat, an unconcerned, masculine coldness.