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Introduction: Erotics of the Terribly Beautiful

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Introduction

Erotics of the Terribly Beautiful

What is the meaning of art, architecture, music, painting, or poetry if not the anticipation of a suspended, wonder-struck moment, a miraculous moment?

—Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*

Culture is the precaution of those who claim to think thought but who steer clear of its chaotic journey.

—Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*

Carmen opens her analytic session as follows: “Many people had slapped me before Ava, but no one ever like her. No previous slap had landed so precisely. It was the right angle, the right amount of force, the right part of my face. It was so exceptional my body felt like it was liquifying.”¹ In her five years of analysis thus far, Carmen has returned to this arresting slap a few times, so singular did it feel to her. But this time she adds something new, and her relationship to it now seems more fraught: “The moment I felt it, I immediately wanted to take back my consent. Yes, I had asked Ava to slap me, but I didn’t mean for her to do it so well. What I had wanted was a mediocre, manageable slap, not one this exquisite.”

I start with a clinical vignette for two reasons. First, I am a practicing psychoanalyst, which means that both my database and my skill set come from the consulting room.² Second, throughout this volume, I rely on a series of case studies from the clinic and beyond—from theater and film, to texts, podcasts, and interviews—as a way to think about consent, trauma, racialization, and the currents of sadism.³ My approach to these case studies is somewhat unusual. For one, I use clinical case studies as springboards to make more universal claims about some processes (e.g., consent, sadism) and their operational mechanics that extend beyond

the particular dynamics of the individuals discussed. For the discussions of these case studies, I lean on the metapsychology of the psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche, who offers a distinctive psychoanalytic theory that is not often encountered by academics or, in fact, by most trained analysts.⁴ Laplanche brings something novel to the understanding of the unconscious and to the theorizing of the ego, which permits him to ask unusual questions of psychic time and to put generative pressure on repetition.⁵ I deploy his thinking *and* stretch it further to reflect on trauma, racialization, and the erotic. One of the premises of this book is that a theorization of sexuality and trauma that understands the unconscious as a granary of unbearable affects and intolerable experiences hamstring our thinking about traumatic experience and, importantly, about race. Pushing back against the fixation with discourses of trauma, I argue that a theorizing of traumatic inscription that assumes trauma to be unchanging and immobile is traumatophobic. Traumatophobia keeps trauma inert, and that poses a problem because trauma that is not inserted into circulation does not wither and disappear: it stalls and it controls us. Trauma, I argue, *needs* to circulate; it *needs* to be revisited. I describe this approach, of maintaining a hospitable attitude to the revisitation of trauma, as “traumatophilic.” Traumatophilia does not overlook or diminish the impact of trauma but offers, instead, a way of working with the recognition that we cannot turn away from our traumata, that we are strangely drawn *to* them. To recognize that traumatic experience is not possible to eliminate takes mental fortitude, as the human impulse is to cling to the idea that trauma can be resolved. But sustaining such illusions is not humane. Much as we would want to think otherwise, the impact of traumatic experiences cannot be eliminated or repaired: at best, we live in their aftermath on different terms than when they were inflicted on us. Relinquishing the idea that trauma can be repaired opens paths to thinking about what subjects do *with* their trauma.

Another distinctive element in my use of psychoanalysis is that my reading of Laplanche’s work is refracted through my engagement with performance theory, philosophy, critical theory, queer studies, and queer of color critique. Consequently, the Laplanche I bring to you is a bit idiomatic and, in a word, “queer.” This is not to say that you are getting a spoiled Laplanche, only a (re)purposed one that is especially exciting for thinking about erotics and aesthetic experience. With his

conceptual help, I intervene in ongoing conversations about affirmative consent to argue a point that runs through this book: while violations of consent are real and deserve our attention, affirmative consent does not. There is no such thing as consent, at least not in the way that affirmative consent paradigms imagine it or in the way it is sold to us as a metric that can subtend ethical relations or inform our sexual politics—though there *very much is* such a thing as its violation. I introduce a different kind of consent paradigm, which I call “limit consent.” Limit consent has ties to the rousing of the sexual drive and entails a nuanced negotiation of limits that belongs neither to the domain of activity nor to the sphere of passivity. Limit consent is not something we “exercise” or something that is “done” to us: it has more to do, rather, with surrendering *to* an other or, more precisely, with surrendering to the opacity in the other and to the opacity in ourselves. Consent, we will see, is not only something that we offer to another; it is also an internal affair. While the usual paradigm around consent is about maintaining control of a situation, limit consent is more about giving up control. If consent is not a way to take control but, within a certain given context, a way to let go of it, we cannot rely on the outcome of an encounter (what happened or how someone felt about it) to decide whether the encounter was ethical. Other variables have to come into play, and aesthetic experience, as I will discuss, is a critical variable in this process with ties to the ethical domain. To explore how limit consent ties to thinking about sexuality, aesthetics, and ethical relations, I put Édouard Glissant in conversation with Laplanche.

Last, there is a rich and important body of theory in queer studies and queer of color critique that has already engaged psychoanalysis to think about racialization, eroticism, and performance (Eng, 2001; Musser, 2014; Pellegrini, 1997; D. Scott, 2010; Stockton, 2006). This work has been enormously influential for me for my own thinking *and* my clinical practice. What I want to bring to these conversations as a clinical psychoanalyst is the benefit of case studies not as hermeneutic projects but as disorienting encounters between embodied subjects, each with a sexual unconscious that *acts on* the other. Let me explain what I mean by the phrase “acting on” here: Freud initially theorized the unconscious as a psychic structure that developed in order to house repressed traumatic memory. Recovering these memories, his early thinking went, could

empty the unconscious of its contents—which implied that one could be “cured” of one’s unconscious. This idea was eventually abandoned, but it continues to haunt the discourse on trauma to this day—as, for example, when we talk about something being “worked through,” about “processing” one’s trauma, or, more colloquially, about exorcizing one’s demons. The deceptive promise that trauma could be drained from the psyche (through recollection or insight) was drastically revised when Freud (1915a) discovered that the unconscious never stopped flaring up in the embodied relation with the analyst (what we call “transference”). The unconscious was thus recast from something that could be extinguished (if we better understand ourselves) to an ever-persistent force that never dissipates and that we encounter in what the patient does *to* the analyst, not just *what* the patient tells them (Kahn, n.d.).

Part of a clinical psychoanalyst’s training thus involves learning to discern where, in what form, and with what possible effects the unconscious *appears* phenomenally—rather than focusing (only) on what information about the past or the patient’s fantasy are disclosed when the unconscious shows up (in symptoms, dreams, etc.).⁶ I bring this sensibility to my discussion of performance and art, to investigate the mechanism through which some theater may have the transformational potential claimed on its behalf. To explain how performance touches us, we usually turn to the interior elements it evokes: for example, we may say that it reminded of us something or that it resonated with something we have experienced or that it spoke to a particular part of ourselves. I want to highlight what is usually disregarded by this overemphasis, to draw our attention to how art or performance acts on us and away from which part of the self/memory it evokes. Those who do not just suffer through difficult art but who savor the anguish and vulnerability that some performance engenders may endure aesthetic experience (Doyle, 2013). Such experience can leave one transformed.

With that said, let us return to Carmen.

Carmen

For Carmen, eroticism has always been inextricably bound to the aesthetic; it has never been about a consolidated or identitarian form of sexuality. What usually compels her libidinal attention is the domain

where the erotic gives chase: in the fiery encounter with one's own opacity that is accessed through the quality and intensity of experience—in experience, that is, that steps off the ledge of representation, where the aesthetic unifies the beautiful with the morbidly strange, the pleasurable with the unexpected. There is a long tradition in literature, film, and performance that links the aesthetic realm with lustful suffering and libidinal ferocity that leaves one spent. To me, Carmen specifically brought to mind the Marquis de Sade's explorations of how principles of aesthetic judgment are implicated in perverse desires (1795/1966c; 1797/1966a). In Sade's novels, the beauty of suffering and the aesthetic dimensions of brutal licentiousness are used to demonstrate—repetitively, logically, and exhaustively—the threat that aesthetics posed to the prized Enlightenment subject's autonomy and reason (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1987; Lacan, 1963/1989). “Exercising aesthetic judgment precisely in order to undermine and critique [Enlightenment] ideologies” (Byrne, 2013, p. 17), Sade produced an aesthetic philosophy that resisted an essentialized ontology of sexuality. Its subject, universalized as White, is not Carmen, who is a Latinx femme dyke. Still, Carmen operated unaware of but entirely in sync with this counter-Enlightenment tradition, pursuing the intensification of experience that can draw one closer to oneself, offering brief yet piercingly impactful bursts of *self-sovereignty*. In chapters 4 and 5 of this volume, I dedicate lengthy sections to this concept of self-sovereignty, derived from the philosophy of Georges Bataille (1954, 1957), and elaborate how it differs from the notion of sovereignty as used in political theory. For now, briefly, self-sovereignty displaces the notion of sovereignty from the domain of power to resituate it to the domain of experience. Self-sovereignty is an intimate experience wherein one's energies are not split by the demands of capitalism (to constantly invest in ourselves and in the world around us) and in which the subject can be transiently relieved from the demands of relationality. It is a rare and transient state.

Carmen's reaction to Ava's slap was very unexpected given her usual attraction to the aesthetics of being undone. I was, therefore, surprised to hear her say that she had wanted to retract her consent because the slap had exceeded her expectations.⁷ Carmen's “consent-regret,” if we can call it that, is not about having granted it to Ava—that is, Carmen did not feel that Ava violated or mistreated her, nor was she “blaming”

Ava for slapping her so excellently. It has more to do with her *relationship to having consented* in the first place—but not because the slap was too much (as in injurious or traumatizing) or too little (as in unsatisfactory or disappointing) but because in surpassing her imagination, *it overcame her*.

The kind of consent Carmen is referencing does not belong to the interpersonal realm of drawing boundaries, communicating them, having them be respected, and so on: it is an internal affair. Carmen experienced something she did not anticipate—though she had signed up for it—and was then unable to surrender herself to the distance between what she expected (a “mediocre” strike) and what she received (an “exquisite” one). This difficulty with surrendering is the last point of defense against becoming overwhelmed and shattered by experience—and chapters 3 and 4 examine what can arise when one moves past the brink and becomes overwhelmed. Notably, Carmen has the integrity—and psychic capacity—to own her regret without attributing it to Ava’s conduct.⁸ Rather, it is Carmen’s confidence in herself that is shaken. The risks entailed in such encounters, then, also involve a kind of personal responsibility that cannot be outsourced to the other. That is, it does not matter how well Ava “holds” Carmen’s emotional experience—though such care is neither irrelevant nor insignificant. Carmen is also responsible for the vulnerability she has invited—and these themes are discussed in chapter 2. What Carmen wishes she could have staved off is how humbled she was by the sensations and the cravings the slap unleashed in her. Said otherwise, the experience seems to have brought Carmen into contact with her opacity—a concept that Glissant describes as “subsistence within an irreducible singularity” (1990, p. 190) and that, as chapter 1 argues, has interesting affinities with the unconscious. Consent, we begin to see, does not only encompass conscious processes unfolding *between* people; it also implicates our interiority. When we consent to something, we open ourselves up to encountering the otherness in ourselves.

I am thus making an argument for limit consent, a type of consent that is conceptually grounded in negative dialectics. Affirmative consent emerges out of the tradition of reading the Hegelian dialectic as giving us an ethic of recognition, wherein wishes and boundaries are communicated and negotiated, recognizing each other’s needs so as to reach a

synthetic conclusion (for example, what kind of sexual contact both are assenting to).⁹ But in this volume, I explore a different ethical terrain than the one we are accustomed to, which arises in the confrontation with the irreducible opacity in oneself and in the other. Where affirmative consent imagines a subject that can be fully transparent to herself, the kind of psychoanalysis you will find in this volume acknowledges that the self cannot be fully known, that we are always somewhat opaque to ourselves, and, therefore, that consent negotiations always involve more than we think we bargained for: they involve a confrontation with what is irreducibly alien to us about ourselves. This confrontation assumes risk, as chapters 2 and 3 will elaborate, and that risk can enable different relational possibilities. Where Hegel gave us a vision of self-consciousness that exists because of the other, Bataille gives us an understanding of self-consciousness as the unknowable in us, which is an experience of a strange order, in that it does not appear phenomenally. What my psychoanalytic take adds to this thinking is a theorization of how that can then be rendered into the material realm so that it can become perceptible, that is, appear phenomenally into the world, where it may leave a lasting impression. Under the aegis of limit consent, relating can thus approximate what Maurice Blanchot described as “infinite conversation” (1969) and what Glissant called “being-in-relation” (1990). Both were referring to the radical potential for self- and world-making that arises when we meet the other without trying to exercise our will over them and when we surrender to our own foreignness to ourselves. Insofar as affirmative consent promises to close the gap between ourselves and the other, it trades in the opaque for recognition, exchanging the unintelligible for the transparent. Affirmative consent does not give us opacity; it insists that the self can be deciphered. But grasping the other—or our hope that the other will grasp us—is neither harmless nor politically neutral: “*to grasp*,” Glissant writes, “contains the movement of hands that grab their surroundings and bring them back to themselves” (1990, p. 192).

In thinking with Glissant, for whom opacity is “that which cannot be reduced” (1990, p. 191) to the terms by which Western thought demands transparency; with Christina León, who sees opacity as a necessary supplement to ethical curiosity (2020a, 2020b); and with Laplanche, for whom the otherness in ourselves is not “ours” but arises through “the intervention of the other” (1991, p. 557), I propose that an understanding

of consent as affirmative interpersonal negotiation fails in that it does not take radical alterity into account. My aim in this volume, is to think about forms of consent that work alongside alterity and to argue for the ethical urgency of consensual paradigms that reach beyond the transparent and the communicable—both of which may be too restricted for sexual politics and minoritarian intersecting identities.

Turning toward Opacity: The Ego's Resistance

Turning toward opacity, however, is neither easy nor effortless. Why? Because opacity, as León notes, “materializes as a resistance” (2020a, p. 172). Her phrase alerts us to how intransigently difficult it may be to be receptive to the opaque, as León seems to imply that some resistance to it will have to be overcome. But what she also seems to be saying is that opacity is *itself* a resistance. Thankfully, we might say, something in us always resists being grasped and understood, and in that sense, opacity may be seen as a sturdiness in us—and that, as we will see, connects to self-sovereignty. This sturdiness in us is always there. The question is what relationship we can develop or maintain with it—or, seen from a different angle, what relationship with it we can bear or endure.

Chapter 1 examines in granular detail how Laplanche's theorization of the psyche can help explain why recoiling from opacity is far easier than giving oneself over to it. For now, epigrammatically, here are the main ideas: For Laplanche (1987), the adult's contact with the infant injects into the infant indecipherable elements from the adult's sexual unconscious. Some of these will eventually lead to the formation of the child's own sexual unconscious, which will henceforth be experienced as an “internal foreign body that must at all costs be mastered and integrated” (2003b, p. 208). These attempts are always partially incomplete and thus doomed to failure. The unconscious derives from this failure to master the turmoil introduced by the other's sexual deviance (the adult's sexual unconscious).¹⁰ This internal foreign body will forever remain an “internalized exteriority” (Fletcher, 2000, p. 101) that is never quite fully metabolized, which is to say that it never becomes ours in the sense of being something we can decipher about ourselves.

The implantation of the other's sexual unconscious into the infant is traumatic, but it is also critical to subjectivation. Why? Because to cope

with this enigmatic disturbance, the infant “translates” these messages, which means that the infant coats them with meaning. The ego is the aggregate effect of these successive coatings accruing over time. The raw materials that the infant reaches for to draft these meanings/coatings come from their excitable, libidinal body and from the socius: concepts, ideas, and myths about how the world works, including gender, race, ethnicity, and so on, all become tools for the building of the ego. Adding to Laplanche’s theory, I will argue that what this means is that the prejudices, stereotypes, and bigotries that underlie concepts such as gender, race, and so on and that, to some degree, are what gives these their density will also become threaded through the ego. In other words, our very sense of the self and of our functional stability is, to varying degrees, also reliant on problematic social values. The significant implication is that White supremacy, male superiority, heteronormativity, and so on reside not in the unconscious but in our egos—and as such, they cannot be eliminated through insight or self-knowledge. If this seems like a big claim, it is because it is—and we will go over it in detail in chapter 1.

The ego thus develops “around a kernel of things that it cannot understand” (Cimatti, 2016, p. 207), becoming invested in its own stability and in maintaining its equilibrium. Once it is formed, one of its central functions henceforth is to master this tumult that enigma—a term I return to shortly—constantly generates. Understanding itself as the sovereign, the ego will mount formidable resistances when it senses that its authority is questioned or that it may be deposed—which is what contact with the sexual unconscious and with the opaque threatens to do. The ego, that is, tries to keep the energetic irreverence of the unconscious at a minimum—if not at bay. This is not to malign the ego as a conservative force, which it also is: we need our ego to feel stable, to enjoy a sense of basic psychic cohesion, and to feel “at home” with ourselves—many aspects of our day-to-day functioning depend on it. But it does mean that the ego’s investments lie in the direction of resisting the foreign—in the other but also the internal foreignness in ourselves that originates from the other’s effraction into us—by appropriating it into its structure. This is the mechanism by which the ego resists opacity. We begin to see, then, that the ego’s default orientation is to maintain its homeostasis by preventing anything it perceives as introducing dysregulating turbulences into the psyche.

This default orientation has interesting implications for intersecting minoritarian identities because while the ego is universally invested in its structural stability, which it defends fervently as a way for subjects to feel “at home,” the raw materials it is made out of are not equally hospitable for all subjects. As such, those for whom dominant social values “work” better because the world makes a home *for* them are better served by the ego’s investment in maintaining the status quo. Those who are minoritized by virtue of their sex, race, nationality, gender, and so on may more readily be willing to risk disturbing the conservative forces of their own egos. To put this differently, is it possible that persons who do not get to be “at home” in the world may be more susceptible, more readily receptive to the disquiet of their own opacity?¹¹ Further, because the social can provide a bolstering of one’s narcissism, it can also operate as a fortification of one’s resistance to encountering one’s opacity. In this sense, dominant social location (e.g., Whiteness) works on the side of resistance: by giving the illusion of being at home, it may embolden the subject’s narcissism, creating the (fragile) sense that problems need not be encountered—an illusion that requires constant reinforcement to be maintained. Chapter 5 explores the particular form of ethical sadism, *exigent sadism*, that is required to put pressure on such illusions.

The fact that the ego will not relinquish its stabilizing investments willingly or, to say it differently, with its consent is why aesthetics and eroticism (perversity in particular) can be such powerful nursemaids for the psychic and political transformations that the ego’s rupture can enable—and endure. Chapters 2 and 3 take up this shattering of the ego through the analytic concept of “overwhelm.” Both the aesthetic realm and the erotic operate in ways that are alien to the ego, which is another way of saying that they can disrupt the ego’s complacency.¹² When this disruption escalates beyond what is bearable, the ego may shatter—a phenomenon explored in chapter 2. Such contestations of the ego’s hegemony are not welcomed, which is why erotic and aesthetic experiences that are most likely to unsettle the ego are harder to give oneself over to.

To be clear, by “unsettling,” I am not referring to experiences that may be upsetting, where the upset is actually compatible with one’s ego investments—as, for example, when a White person feels upset that they did something racist but nonetheless focuses on their upset, thereby resisting reckoning with how their racist act could rework their sense of

themselves. Rather, I am discussing experiences that challenge the ego by jeopardizing its economic stability. Such challenging of the ego's reign requires that one pushes back against one's own ego's self-conservation. I call this countering of the ego's resistances *bending one's will*. If we loop back to Carmen with this in mind, her appetite for erotic aestheticism and the usual susceptibility she brings to coming up against the strange in herself may now be seen as a facility in bending her will. Such facility is always fleeting and short-lived, which is another way of saying that the bending of the will is not a durable capacity that one develops but a receptivity that has to be wrested each time, again and again, against the objections of the ego. The latter is what happens for Carmen around the experience of the slap: she does not respond to it in the way she does during other encounters, in which she is usually able to surrender to the experience. In this case, Carmen is unable to bend her will: she resists encountering her own opacity.

Lest this is misunderstood, let me emphasize that in talking about the bending of one's will, I am *not* talking about a willfulness of the kind that solidifies one's experience of agency, which is more the domain of the ego. Nor is the bending of the will about willing a specific outcome but, rather, about what it takes to step into the fray of the unknown. Such bending of the will is not isomorphic to masochism. If anything, what is on the line when the subject bends their will is not a diminishment of the self but its expansion.¹³ In chapters 2 and 5, I will specifically elaborate on, and argue for, the utility of some forms of sadism and show how in exigent sadism, the "sadistic" subject also has to bend their will. We will go over these ideas from multiple angles, but what I want to underscore here is that the bending of the will involves having to overcome a gradient of internal resistance. In fact, the more heterogeneous to the ego the encounter feels, the higher the gradient of pushback one will encounter and have to overcome. And let me also be clear that what I am describing involves the bending of one's *own* will, not the other's, which would amount to sheer violence and which is not related to my project.

The Economic Regimes of the Erotic and the Aesthetic

Let us linger in the interstices of what occurs as the unconscious is pressing for translation before its energies are coagulated into meaning,

that is, in the space of opacity that the ego so fervently resists. I argue that this “interval between reach and grasp” (Carson, 1986, p. 30) is the domain of aesthetics: herein one is exposed to the energetic fervor of the enigmatic, a site of excitement but, also, of our sheer vulnerability. Accessing this domain requires, as already discussed, the bending of the will, but such bending cannot be an intentional undertaking, as is the case, for example, with willfulness, since the pooling of intentionality with action is in the province of the ego. When we bend our will, we make ourselves subject *to* something, we endure the rousing of something in ourselves that “does not have the character of calculation or strategy . . . [and that] requires that one can risk . . . put[ting] oneself blindly into play” (Hollier, 1979, p. 321). Encountering opacity means that we dwell in such spaces without giving in to the impulse of trying to master the experience—for example, by seeking to understand or to interpret or to symbolize what is unfolding—and without trying to turn the experience into a project, as in “the philistine demand that the artwork give [us] something” (Adorno, 1970, p. 17). What comes out of this form of aesthetic experience is not intentional or willed.

If we tarry in this interval, it is not through deliberate choice or willful decision—*nor it is with the ego’s consent*. Some subjects develop a taste for such experiences, gorging themselves on it through performance, art, or the erotic—and in chapter 4, where I use myself as a case study, I describe my own relationship to Jeremy O. Harris’s *Slave Play* as such gorging. But for now, and with these ideas in mind, we may recast Carmen’s verbalization in the following terms: the fantasy of retrospectively withdrawing her consent may be about mastering the perturbation that Ava’s jolting slap introduced.¹⁴ It is only when one resists the possibility of mastery or when the urge to master is taken away by someone else (which, as we will see, is what an exigent sadist does) that one gets to experience—a word that, tellingly, in French also means “experiment.” In chapter 5, I introduce and elaborate on the concept of “exigent sadism” as a type of sadism that involves considerable work on the part of the exigent sadist. Exigent sadism, we will see, is a form of care that can foster encounters with opacity for those who, despite everything, are willing to embark on such a voyage. My hope is to stimulate conversations about sadism that deepen our critical engagement with a concept that is mostly demonized. Sadism does indeed have a demonic dimen-

sion, but exigent sadism, as I will show, is also a form of absolute exposure (on the part of the sadist) and performs important work related to caring for another.

In speaking about these phenomena, it is very hard to be precise or clear—in fact, clarity threatens the opacity of the very processes I am trying to describe. Perhaps poetry can help us here. Anne Carson turns to Zeno’s paradox; “Zeno’s runner,” she writes, “never gets to the finish line of the stadium, Zeno’s Achilles never overtakes the tortoise, Zeno’s arrow never hits the target . . . [Each of these distances] contains a point where the reasoning seems to fold into itself . . . [and each time] it can begin again, and so the reach continues” (1986, p. 81). Now, if you happen to be someone who can enjoy the suffering of such a process, “you are delighted to begin again” (Carson, 1986, p. 81). The aesthetic, I would say, resides precisely in the luxuriating bittersweetness of this exercise. For those who “like being situated at that blind but lively spot” (Carson, 1986, p. 87), some erotic engagement, much like some art and performance, may put such experimenting in motion—though which erotic moment, which theatrical piece, or which artwork will have that singular effect on any of us is impossible to tell ahead of time. The form of aesthetic experience this book focuses on, in other words, is not something we attain by plan or determination, nor is it arrived at through the formal elements of the artwork. Not all art is equally likely to spur such movements. The sort of aesthetic experience I am concerned with is the province of art that refuses to offer understanding or resolution, frustrating the expectation it also cultivates and disappointing the hope of a cathartic outcome (chapters 4 and 5 illustrate and expand on these ideas). In *Aesthetic Theory*, Theodor Adorno explicitly urges us to refrain from “burdening artworks down with intentions” (1970, p. 27) so that we may let ourselves experiment, instead, with what may await us when “content becomes more opaque. Certainly, this does not mean that interpretation can be dispensed with as if there were nothing to interpret.” What Adorno advocates for is exposure to an “increasing opacity” that does not get “replac[ed] by the clarity of meaning” (1970, p. 27).

As you can see, I am not interested in theorizing the interior psychological features that can enable some subjects to develop a taste out of this interstitial space between enigma and translation or to examine art as an inquiry of what it revives *about* the past. My project, rather, seeks

to map how some art stuns, at times even slaps us, in order to explore how some performance works on us not by kindling the past *as memory* but by revivifying it *in the present* as a force in the here and now. One of this book's organizing premises is that the aesthetic may have less to do with meaning and more to do with the imprint of pleasure that is suffered, an imprint that can deliver us beyond the reach of the everyday and into "the marrow of experience" (Adorno, 1970, p. 31).

Aesthetics of the Terribly Beautiful

The term "experience" is commonly used to describe the distinct, subjective sense we may have of an event: as in, "I experienced x person as thoughtful" or "my experience of y event was traumatizing." In this usage, "experience" refers to discrete moments or to a series of impressionable moments. In this volume, following Adorno (1970), I steer away from the reduction of experience into psychological subjectivism. Instead, I rely on the term "aesthetic experience" to reference experience that is not the property of the subject but that arises out of an encounter with the other's and our own alterity. Aesthetic experience relates to the enigmatic quality that extends beyond what the subject intends or aims for. It is a dynamic form of experience that involves an interaction with an object outside the self—a person, a piece of art, an encounter—and the interior process it sparks. For that to happen, the outside object "must treat the other in a non-dominating, non-subsumptive, non-homogenizing manner" (Jay, 2005, p. 356), and when that happens, the effect can be transformative. Chapter 5 explores the critical role that exigent sadism can play in curating aesthetic experience that draws into/makes us confront opacity, but, for now, let me turn to my understanding of aesthetic theory as framed by Fred Moten's powerful discussion of Emmett Till and "Black Mo'nin'" (2003).

"How can this photograph challenge ontological questioning?" asks Moten, meditating on the aesthetic possibilities that may dwell in looking again and again at the photograph of Emmett Till's destroyed face (2003, p. 62). It may seem odd that anyone would think to summon aesthetics at the site of an atrocious crime committed against a Black child who was shot in the head and thrown in the river for allegedly whistling at a White woman. What Moten is trying to do, as I read him,

is to intervene in the way Western political philosophy (through Kant) and aesthetic theory (through Barthes) have argued for the beautiful in ways that historically exclude people of color, in order to explore aesthetics that encompass the terrible. To the inquiry of how Emmett Till's photograph challenges ontological questioning, Moten offers that this may be accomplished "*by way of a sound, and by way of what's already there in the decision to display the body, to publish the photograph, to restage death and rehearse mo(ur)nin(g)*" (2003, p. 62). For Moten, such a decision "is never disconnected from an aesthetic one, from a necessary reconstruction of the very aesthetics of photography, of documentary, and, therefore, of truth, revelation, and enlightenment as well as of judgment, taste, and, therefore, the aesthetic itself" (2003, p. 62). What Moten poignantly flags is that the aesthetic is neither synonymous with the beautiful nor is it a depoliticized pleasure. Invoking the sonic dimension in the site of this torture scene, he seems to want to defamiliarize us from the usual ways in which we might have otherwise engaged with Till's image, prying us away from "the ocularcentrism that . . . shapes theories of the nature of photography and our experience of [it]." Moten wants to reorient our attention toward the photograph's "phonic substance" (2003, pp. 62–63).

How, though, does one listen to a photograph? And what does one listen for? There is, we might say, an opacity to Moten's call, which leaves the space open for his readers to fill this in themselves. For me, Moten's call to tend to the sonic may be read as an incitement to fantasize *about* the photograph, to hear in it not some latent, previously undiscovered sound that resides *in* the image but to allow the photograph to act on us, to rouse a sonic response (the essay's titular "mo'nin'" and perhaps other sounds too). For that to happen, we have to let "what we thought we could look at and hold, hold[] *us*, capture[] *us*" (Moten, 2003, p. 64, emphasis added). Moten thus directs us toward "a general disruption of the ways in which we gaze at the face and at the dead" (2003, p. 64). His move entails an ethical call: not to look in order to master but to let oneself be acted on by the photograph's dysregulating force. This, in turn, might rouse something in us over which we have no willful control but for which we will nonetheless be responsible. His asking us to return to the photograph again and again is not staged as a demand, even though that does not make it any less of an ethical imperative: to stay sutured

to the photograph, we will have to bend our will and resist the impulse to look away—because it is too hard to look at, because it hurts one’s soul to look, because it is too bizarrely compelling to look. We have to resist, that is, the ego’s inclination to easily assimilate the photograph into the a priori it expects to find in it. This is where Moten’s inventiveness regarding the acoustic register comes in: a less trod path than the visual, the sonic is, perhaps, less appropriate, less given to “grasp” the photograph to bring it toward oneself and one’s preordained meanings. Why do we listen in the first place? Because the opaque pulls us in; it draws us into the image, and it is in following that exigency that we stand to listen to it.

Listening to the photograph as an incitement to fantasize *about* the photograph opens us up to the gap between the photograph and ourselves, not so that we see it more clearly, as if there were some previously undiscovered detail to take in, but to eavesdrop on what gets roused in us. Listening makes us attentive, though not for something specific, because no matter how hard we listen, there is no sound to tend to, but to turn toward the hollow, toward opacity—and it is that turn that motors us to fantasize. Here, then, is a form of listening that is not about perceiving or grasping something but about dispossession. To listen this way, to listen for the “gap,” we have to give ourselves over to our own unconscious, which is another way of saying that listening to the sonic is also about giving ourselves over to the perverse in us. It is worth remembering here that Till’s murder was set in motion by the sexual fantasies recounted by a White woman. They were sexual in that she reported that he had “grabbed her around the waist and uttered obscenities,” and they were fantasies, because, in 2017, the woman admitted to having made that up. In other words, she fantasized about it but reported it as a factual event. To listen to the photograph, then, would also have to involve listening for the way in which the perverse may be commandeered—in this case, by racist fantasy. Such listening may feel unpalatable, even horrific, because we do not know what our unconscious will produce or, thus, what we will encounter. Therein lies also the difficulty with which one must contend: even as the unconscious is never “ours,” in that its force is not under our “command,” it is also *of* us, which means that we are responsible for its effects in the world. Because the unconscious is an alterity that can never be integrated into the ego, it is not subjectively

ours (that is, we do not possess our unconscious), and yet we are still responsible for its effects in the world (Laplanche, 1994/2015d).

We listen to Till's photograph, then, not just with our ears but with our entire body, including the libidinal body, which is also a racialized body. The libidinal and the enigmatic, that is, participate in our response to the aesthetic object; they contribute to this dispossessed form of listening that can lead to our own disruption. If we can bend our will to give ourselves over to the "*terribly beautiful*" (Moten, 2003, p. 74) in this photograph, we are also ethically obligated to listen attentively so that we may eavesdrop on ourselves for what arises out of such an encounter. It is this odd blend of self-relinquishment and ethical responsibility that can make being engrossed with Till's destroyed face not gratuitously voyeuristic but deeply ethical: to stay tethered to the photograph not as an epistemological project to be mastered but to expose ourselves to its force is to experience the limits of our being. This has profound political implications that will be expounded on in chapters 4 and 5. And the invitation is itself risky, because there is no way of ensuring that if what is roused in us turns out to be ugly, we will have the integrity to engage it in an ethically and politically accountable way. Part of the danger in turning to opacity is that although it opens up the space for thinking about ethical engagement, it also requires that we think about the menacing and the horrid. Opacity, that is, is not a guarantee of "good" politics, nor are the ethical and the horrid antithetical; they belong to the same order.

Emmett Till's photograph, like the art and performance I discuss in this book, denies us the comfortable distance of spectatorship, propositioning the viewer "to lose himself, [to] forget himself, [to] extinguish himself in the artwork" (Adorno, 1970, p. 17). This volume thus takes up aesthetic objects that do not operate under the Aristotelian regime of a cathartic, resolute release, but follow the economy of the sexual drive, procuring intensely lived experience and acute intoxications. My interest lies in the way some art and performance achieve their effects on us not because they make contact with some formed content or memory in us that they activate but by creating dizzyingly intense experiences that meet us at the core of our being.

Bringing Adorno into contact with Laplanche and Glissant, we may thus begin to understand what Adorno meant when he talked about ap-

proaching art objects not to make the artwork like ourselves but, rather, to make ourselves more like the artwork (1970). Performance, art, and eroticism do not ask for our consent: we either give ourselves over to them or we do not, which is a different way of saying that these regimes operate under the aegis of limit consent. This brings us to Mia.

Mia

Mia arrived to our first consultation session “six years too late,” which is how long it took her to be able to ask for help. Not only, she told me, was she afraid that she would “be made to talk” about her traumatic childhood, but as a Black trans woman, she could not imagine “feeling safe” with *any* therapist—so fucked up is, really, the world.¹⁵ Her three previous consultations with other analysts had confirmed her concerns. So, if she was sitting in my office at this moment, she wanted me to understand, it was not because she wanted to but because she had to: her relationship was declining and transitioning was proving harder than she had expected. It did not take a psychoanalyst to sense the deep vulnerability lurking underneath the surface of Mia’s matter-of-fact, no-bullshit demeanor. I instantly liked her.

I listened carefully, asked a few questions, and made a comment that she seemed to find relevant. She softened a bit as we talked. At the end of our first meeting, which I thought had gone well, I asked her if she wanted to return to finish the consultation. She said she did. She asked about my fee. At the time, I was a second-year candidate building my private practice, which means that my fees were comparatively low.¹⁶ I told her my fee, anxious that it would betray how green I was. Instead, it made her angry. She could easily afford it—and, she now revealed, she was in possession of some wealth—but she said that it was more than she wanted to pay. She asked if I had sliding-scale slots available. I said that I did but that I reserved them for people whose need was financial. Predictably, this did not land well. Mia shot back that she found “politically problematic” my asking her to pay more simply because she had money. I was taken aback by her sense of entitlement. I started wishing I had brought up the fee myself on our initial call, even though she had not asked about it.¹⁷ Mia was now acting as if I had somehow tricked her by exciting a craving that came at too high a price. Then, as if something

previously obscure had become illuminated, she pointed her finger at me and said, “I *did not* consent to this. I *do not* consent to this. *You screwed me.*” I was momentarily frozen, watching myself, as if in slow motion, shape-shift in Mia’s mind into someone who violated her. I did not agree with her assessment of what had occurred. I wondered, and told her, if the *this* to which she had not consented was more than just my fee—which, by this point, she had disdainfully informed me she intended to pay. Might it have something to do with her *wanting* to come back? “That’s *some bullshit!*” she replied. Time was up, we had to stop. I was more than a little relieved.

The night prior to our second session, Mia had a sexual dream about me. She had been unable to dream in years, so this dream made her unexpectedly hopeful—convincing her that she should work with me. But this also intensified her feeling of vulnerability, so my having “screwed” her in the first session now took center stage. She recounted the dream and then explained the predicament I had put her in: had I mentioned my fee on the phone, she would have never made a first appointment, she would have never met me, she would not now be finding herself in the position of wanting to work with me, and, therefore, she “would have never gotten into this mess,” where her “only option” was to pay me “an uncomfortable amount.” But now it was too late. The damage was done. Since she now did not want to see someone else, she would have to “submit” to me. Furiously silent, Mia weighed her options.

Finally, she said she could only see one way forward: she was willing to begin an analytic treatment with me, meeting four times a week, but only on the condition that we both understand that she would be entering analysis against her consent. Suffice it to say, this did not thrill me. The work is hard enough as it is, and starting an analysis with someone who already felt that I had “screwed” her made me nervous. In all honesty, I had somewhat soured to the idea of working with her. If you are thinking that that is already a lot of drama for two sessions, that is because it is. But, I hasten to add, it is also how the work proceeds, through the patient’s dynamics becoming dramatized—that is, enacted and lived out—between the patient and the analyst through the action of the unconscious. Usually, however, it takes much longer for this kind of intensity to develop in a therapeutic relationship, and, as such, these two sessions forecast a tumultuous treatment.¹⁸

So it may surprise you to hear that I accepted Mia's condition.

There were several reasons. First, I was utterly fascinated by the way consent was being problematized so early on in the treatment. When referring to something becoming "problematized," we usually mean that it is being turned into a problematic, converted from something self-evident to something that may be queried. In psychoanalytic work, something becomes problematized not in the verbal, dialogic exchange but, rather, in the way it becomes inserted in the transference: not through words but in the way it gets under the analyst's skin, in the way it *acts on* the analyst—in this case, then, on me.¹⁹

Second, although Mia and I had not yet explicitly spoken about our racial difference (and would not until later in the treatment), I sensed—not yet able to articulate why—that Mia's insistence that the treatment was starting against her consent was less about the fee per se. Could the "drama" around it have been the medium through which something about race was getting played out in the session? (In fact, the work that followed proved that that was the case.)²⁰ Racial difference entered the consulting room not through language about race or racism but encoded in our discussion about consent.²¹

Last, I was especially intrigued that, in Mia's experience, I had somehow *seduced* her by arousing in her the longing to work with me. In those early meetings, Mia had not yet used the word "seduction," as she later would. But the idea was presaged in her sexual dream of me: in the dream, she met someone who shared some physical features with me for a blind date; the woman teased and then left her "hanging out to dry." Mia was not right about my "tricking" her, but she was also not wrong. The analytic situation, in its promise of deep listening, in its offer of an unusual and outlandish intimacy, and in its careful guarding of the asymmetry between analyst and patient, always involves an inadvertent "ethical seduction" (Chetrit-Vatine, 2014).²²

Seduction, however, as the term is used by Laplanche, is not unique to the psychoanalytic situation; it is part of the process of human subjectivation overall. In other words, it is not a deceitful ruse by which the other is entrapped, though it does involve an unauthorized trespass—in that the adult's perverse effraction into the infant is beyond "consent" and leaves behind an imprint that indelibly marks the child. We will revisit seduction in chapters 1 and 2 of this volume, and it will help us

discern how subjectivity and the subject-object relation are inaugurated through encounters that materialize at the border of our consent, encounters that create a messiness from which we can never fully extricate ourselves and that, to boot, vibrate on an erotic frequency.

Accordingly, although Mia's "dramatic" beginning comes to us from the consulting room, it raises issues that are not unique to psychoanalytic work. We are all routinely humbled by how our experience of autonomy and sense of sovereignty are delimited by the unexpected and the unforeseen arising in our encounter with the other. Such contact with opacity and with the unknown may whet appetites we did not know we had, embroiling us in situations we may have not chosen to get tangled into. We do not always get to draft the conditions of our interpersonal encounters, encounters to which we have to sometimes submit, sometimes surrender, to get part of what we need or want. Such surrender, Mia's case underscores, is not necessarily welcome or relieving—that is, Mia was not thrilled with the circumstances of our origin story, and neither was I. But let us also note, recalling Carmen from earlier in our discussion, that while Carmen did not blame Ava but recoiled from the experience, Mia accused me but did not recoil. Her inventive solution (that we work together against her consent) could be seen as an effort to find a way to stay in relation with me, not to move away from but to move *into* the gap-space between us. We could say that I, too, in agreeing to start analytic work under this peculiar premise, relinquished my hold over the way I understand how the work should begin.²³ To enter the analytic relationship at all, then, Mia and I both had to suspend our expectations—and both of us did so against our consent, having to bend our will. Of course, Mia's dynamics inform what she brings to and how she handles her feelings about my fee.²⁴ The same applies for me and my handling of the situation—however good I think my reasons may be. An "ethical relation to alterity," writes León, does not "sediment difference into a domesticated realm" (2020a, p. 169), which means that Mia's original presentation was not a hurdle to be cleared but the very site of our ethical engagement. Such ethical engagement will not always be easy, uncomplicated, or generous, which is one reason why we may not come to it willingly but despite ourselves—as was the case with Mia and me.²⁵ To surpass this resistance, both Mia and I had to bend our wills, to step not just into the unknown but into terrain that felt somewhat tricky or dangerous to both of us.

Psychoanalysis has treated racial, gendered, and sexual otherness atrociously, so if even the invocation of the term sets off red flags, you are in good company. And even when more inclusive, psychoanalysis remains easily caught in the stranglehold of neoliberal logics, inculcated in prioritizing thinking about productivity or value. In chapter 4 I discuss how the concepts of sublimation and creativity offer themselves as alibis for this capitalist slant. To me, however, the analyst's job is not to heal: it is to resist the narrative of restoration or repair, to refuse the idea that anyone ever returns to some prelapsarian moment, to the restoration of innocence before trauma, or to a harmonious reconciliation toward a utopian future. The analyst, in other words, cannot afford to be traumatophobic; she needs to be traumatophilic. Much more important than repair is a nondominating relationship between the subject (the ego) and her unconscious, which also means a nondominating relationship between the subject and the object. What this requires is a frustrating of the subject's desire (her will) to master the world through conceptual and practical activity, including understanding and "insight." The psychoanalytic attitude involves, rather, signing up for the unexpected, for surprise, and for contradiction. That makes psychoanalysis into an aesthetic practice. It is also what makes it an adventure.

I wrote this book in that vein. I was drawn to writing it as my way of coping with the strain of watching *Slave Play*, a play that, as you will read in chapter 4, overwhelmed and startled me. I wrote this book because I could not look away, because I wanted or, more precisely, because I *needed* to forge a relationship with the aesthetic experience that *Slave Play* roused in me. The risk of reading this book, no less than the risk of writing it, is to experience what happens when we expose ourselves to something unknown, not knowing where it will take us—including to unfamiliar concepts and texts or to defamiliarized uses of concepts and texts we thought we already knew.

I also wrote this book for you, not the plural you but the singular you. You can read it for its ideas, and I hope you will. But this is not only a book about ideas; it is a book that also wants to give you an experience. Writing this way is a risk. It has required a great vulnerability of me. Writing this book has also led me to places I did not expect to go, to

experiences I did not expect to have. It has taken me to places that scare me. More than once, I found myself before something much bigger than myself, towering over me. I have written this book so that you can follow me there. You do not know what you will experience, what you will encounter, how it may disturb you, what it might set in motion in you. But if you stay with me, if you go slowly, if you linger in the interstitial spaces between reach and grasp, this book can give you more: it can demand something *of* you. Perhaps you will have an experience yourself.

More than anything, I wrote this book for readers who savor their experiences, who are willing to push themselves to the limits of self-understanding, who are able, and eager even, to bend their will. For readers willing to be pulled out of reason to tread into something raw and tender, for readers who yearn to go beyond the sensible, there is an elsewhere in yourself to which these pages may take you. I have, in fact, written this book imagining you giving yourself over to me, which is a strange thing to say given that I do not know you. Neither do you.

Let us begin.

