



# Pleasure Can Hurt: The Erotic Politics of Sexual Coercion

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Sexual coercion is an unstable practice, often performed nervously on the boundary between flirtation and violation, flattery and coercion. While it is true that sexuality may sometimes be lived on a liminal fourth dimension, where it is immunized from morality by the press of (mutual) desire, it is also true that desire can be commandeered by all manner of malignancies which coopt the erotic into a traumatic register. This essay takes sexual coercion on its face, and explores many of its grim varieties, while also seeking to deconstruct the alchemy of sexuality, awash in its painful pleasures.

Every time it seems as if we have exhausted our supply of top tier sexual predators, another one bites the dust. No one, except those paid to do it, can keep track of the list of those accused, some of whom are now viewed as casualties of the “moral panic” (overreaction) that surrounds the issue – a recent example might be the MSNBC anchor Chris Matthews.

I will be choosing, in these remarks, to take sexual coercion on its face – and to track a number of its grim varieties. But I will end by raising some questions about whether and how we can ever fully position sexuality on a moral/political register.

## EROTIC EMBODIMENT/EROTIZED RETRIBUTION

We assemble our embodiment via a practice of solitary flirtation, each one of us exhaustively studying our image to determine how to maximize what’s best and camouflage what doesn’t meet the standard.

Mastery requires committing to extensive and expensive disciplinary regimes of diet, exercise and surgery, but the quest for this elusive, unforgiving standard of excellence is of course never-ending. A mirage in the desert, beauty beckons – and torments us.

Yet it is not really beauty so much as *effort* we reward. The life of the body is not sensual, it is grim. Driven by a Protestant ethic of self-scrutiny and self-discipline, we are tasked with surveilling the body’s every detail. Consider how many ways the vagina itself is now often slated for a makeover!

Yet we approve of body modification practices, especially those that show hard work, because of our enthrallment with the omnipotent quest to remake ourselves in the image of

an ideal type, by whatever cultural metric. But when there is a failure of effort – or of outcome – the failed image spooks us, and the failed subject is kept at arms’ length. (Consider our fear and loathing of fat people. When they lose the weight, they can rejoin the fold. But if they get too big, they become radioactive and we want them to stay indoors).

The upkeep of such a body is a practice riven with contradiction. In the quest to become a viable object of desire, we live a paradox Dimen (1986) considered to be endemic to femininity, which she argued was lived as a compromise formation: neither subject *nor* object, but “subject-*as*-object.”

We may want to be wanted, she observed, but we also want to be left alone. While this double message, “Look but don’t touch” can be arrestingly seductive, it can also read as a taunt to be defied. Consider, for example, the INCEL (Involuntarily Celibate) online community of men who have been abject failures in the sexual marketplace, and who now valorize their murderous rage toward women as a fitting punishment.

While women blame themselves when they lose at this game, redoubling their efforts at diet, exercise, surgery – and of course psychotherapy – (these) men blame women with a blood lust that has led to mass murder. Consider how often mass attackers turn out to be misogynists violently obsessed with female rejection (Bosman et al., 2019).

## SEXUAL POLITICS OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Sexual harassment is an erotic relationship, performed nervously on the boundary between flirtation and violation, flattery and coercion (Goldner, 2018). Once that line is crossed, “he” (for our purposes) will take obsessive sadistic pleasure in violating her everyday with his intrusive sexualizing, forcing “her” into an obsessive preoccupation with his intentions. As the dignity of work is stolen from her, she will be forced into operating on a masochistic/traumatic register. (“I don’t want any of this, but I must think about it all the time.”)

He, on the other hand, can *enjoy* thinking about it all the time, enacting his toxic scenario whenever it suits him. In a sinister “fort da” game of “worker/bunny/worker,” he startles, objectifies and then dismisses his object of desire, like a cat toying with a mouse. In this exhausting, never-ending game, he deflects from the doer/done-to dynamic driving much of male competition (“If I don’t win, I lose”) by repetitively turning the dreaded risk of becoming a defeated bottom into the edgy high of being a top.

Indeed, the “fear of falling” that Barbara Ehrenreich (1989) connected to the rise of the middle class is dynamically soldered into the repetition compulsion of these dynamics.

- I cannot risk being rejected.
- You cannot laugh me off — or worse, make me out to be ridiculous.
- You *cannot say no to me*.

While the harasser’s interminable, unwelcome foreplay vibrates on a permanently activated sado-masochistic frequency (one that always delivers since he never has to actually perform), his target is deposited into a sado-traumatic swamp, with no escape other than joblessness. As she struggles for air, he returns to *his* workday, untroubled by the scene he has already compartmentalized, and will barely remember.

The erotic requirements of this practice vibrate on a razor's edge. The object of desire must still be a subject—not a thing-lump moaning on the floor. What is key to the practice is that the target must somehow still be “in there,” fighting for herself, but losing. It simply does not work if she is completely defeated. There is something to be said for the eros of the fully dehumanized sadomasochistic object, like the unnamed protagonist in the *Story of O* – but that is not *this* game. Instead, the pleasure to be had here is that of watching the woman betray herself while trying to protect her personhood, as he goes about dismantling it in a slow drip of degradation.

First, there is the pleasure in activating “the startle” – that sudden, shape-shifting realization that this is not the next ordinary moment in the target's unremarkable business day – but the moment when she realizes that, from now on, her days are not her own. What follows is a canyon of dread – the muddled uncertainty (“did he just ... ?”), the shock of poisonous betrayal (“I thought he thought the world of me ... ”), the stinging shame (“I am just a body who happens to speak, not a speaking subject”).

As the workplace becomes unpredictably sexualized, getting flustered becomes commonplace, and the target's workbrain yields to its ancient forbear: the amygdala of “fight/flight/freeze.” In this whiplash of shifting cognitions, the harasser can enjoy the pleasure of having a plan whose outlines are unclear to his object. (“What will happen? Will it happen *this* time? Will it happen *every* time? *When* will it happen? *Which* time?”)

#### A PERVERSION OF MUTUAL RECOGNITION AND “CONSENT”

Sexual harassment is a form of coercion turning on a perverse variant of mutual recognition. It is not a simple relationship of objectification (“I want you to do what I want”) because the perpetrator is preoccupied with the object's *subjectivity*, not only with her body. Sexual objectification is obviously central to the mix, but the ultimate goal is that of sexual *subjectivization*. (*I don't want you to merely submit, I want you to betray yourself in the act of submission – becoming my sado-erotic object by being simultaneously compromised and precariously confused. In other words, I do not want a victim whose mind is still her own.*)

The pleasure to be had in this extreme sport is that of the *perversion* of consent. Unlike rape where consent is vanquished, or erotic mutuality, where it is ratified, the pleasure of sexual harassment is that consent is *extracted* – ie. it is “*consent*” *under duress* – an iteration of the logic of “the least bad option,” a form of reasoning all girls learn to master when they first start making out.

Until the Harvey Weinstein sentence (23 years!), a woman's erotic concession was likely to be misread by both lovers and pundits as the equivalent of her “consent.” Unless the woman fought back, or was totally broken, she was implicated—and often *felt* implicated. Instead of being recognized as a victim who found a way to survive, women in these circumstances felt shamed by the very fact of their survival, which often led to decades of self-imposed silence.

But here again, it is important to underscore that the harasser is not actually seeking the target's consent. Indeed, her *genuine* consent would be truly threatening.

- If she really starts to want me, I would have to perform to satisfy her, to find and be found by her, indeed to need her in ways that could be compromising to me – even mysterious.
- She could then claim a moment of triumph – ‘I got him to grovel’ - a reversal of the power dynamic that has always served me so well).
- *But I can recover my edge.*
- Your erotic power is worthless outside of my orbit.
- *You are a body. I am the Big Boss. Everyone shills for me.*

### SEXUAL HARASSMENT = A FORM OF EROTIC SADISM

This is a strategy that will evolve and complicate over time. It is a practice of leisurely objectification.

You have to be at work (it is not a street crime), you have to be in charge of someone (and thus in possession of some measure of success) and you probably have to corrupt others to stay quiet or to actually arrange the set up (a cynical strategy that dispenses with the need to for brute force because it turns potential witnesses into confederates and bystanders, thus further isolating the target by messaging her that absolutely no one cares.

In sum, sexual harassment is a form of erotic sadism, orchestrated and deliberate.

Unlike rape, which is typically an impulsive, propulsive act meant to *vanquish* the object, sexual harassment is designed to actually *torment* her – making it a unique form of sadistic erotic entitlement that can deliver sexual pleasure without even requiring physical touch. This is because the pleasure being sought cannot be reduced to sexual “*satisfaction*,” since the craving is less a desire for a particular outcome, as it is a craving for erotic tension *itself* – fueled by the pulsing ambiguity of whether and when the target can be coaxed to betray herself.

Remember, these men could have almost anyone – why did they take these high stakes, unnecessary chances? Why bother?

Why did Charlie Rose take all those long, awkward weekend drives on the Long Island Expressway with those nervous inexperienced interns, none of whom could make Rose-level conversation to make the time pass? Why did Matt Lauer prey upon his assistant, who was allegedly trapped behind a locked door, when he could have so easily gotten an old lover to meet him at a nearby hotel, and take the stairs? Why did Les Moonves jump on top of some of his most respected female colleagues, slathering them with his tongue and hands – in front of photos of his wife and family?

There is the addiction to risk – of course, the eros of pushing the envelope, the defiling of decency by relocating sex play *about* the office *to* the office – all of which contribute to what sex is all about. Indeed, this is precisely the eros we encounter when listening to the secretly recorded tapes of Harvey Weinstein, pressuring his target, Ambra Gutierrez, to come into his hotel room. (While all his victims report the sex he ultimately demanded turned out to be brief and pathetic, his pursuit of it was artful and ominous.)

Here is where it becomes clear that Henry Kissinger had it partially wrong: it is not “power [itself] that is an aphrodisiac,” but the exquisite tension of a power *imbalance*—what I can make

you do, make you put up with, make sure you never forget. (“You can do Anything if you are a Celebrity” the Donald famously bragged.)

In this erotic equation, the predator’s satisfaction lies in getting the woman to “give it up” despite herself, not because he got her to want him. This is a near-perfect illustration of Robert Stoller’s (1975) classic thesis that “perversion” is the “erotic form of hatred,” which he saw as an eroticization of the subject’s trauma history (Weinstein’s traumatic history being, of course, unknown to us).

### SEXUAL HARASSMENT AS A DOUBLE BIND

The psychic torment at the core of this situation is driven by what the systems theorist and researcher Gregory Bateson called a “double bind”: a series of contradictory messages that create an airless trap of confusion that cannot be named, and from which there is no exit (Bateson et al., 1962).

Consider, for instance, the early stages in an unfolding process of sexual harassment. The target is told “I think the world of you,” but soon enough is asked to “twirl,” to “smile,” to “unbutton her blouse a bit,” or give her boss a massage or talk to him while he parades in a bathrobe, etc.

‘I startle you, objectify you, then mind-fuck you and glide back to business, disqualifying your reality testing as I go.’

*‘This is/is not happening’*

You cannot put words to it. You cannot clarify the situation. You cannot escape – if you want to work in the industry.

Indeed, if you comment on the toxic paradox, *you* become the one bringing sex into the workplace, the one creating a crisis. This might even result *in* sex, if you seem to be weak enough, or equally catastrophically, to the loss of your job and prospects in the industry, if you are now seen as a problem or decide to give up on your dreams rather than subject yourself to these never-ending, under-the-radar acts of predation.

Under such conditions, the “Get-it-together Girl” question, “Why didn’t you just leave?”, “laugh him off,” “shake him off,” “go to HR,” presumes a clarity of selfhood that may well have been already dismantled. Not in possession of all of her faculties, perhaps not really in her right mind, the issue is not one of leaving, or of changing the situation, but one of reality testing.

It does not help to remind such a victim to “Just say no,” when her question is “What just happened?”

### SEXUAL BOUNDARY VIOLATIONS

Gabbard (1996/2016) and Celenza (2011) have described a taxonomy of sexual boundary offenders, but it is only the “lovesick” therapist, sliding down a “slippery slope” who concerns

me here. This is the clinician who, in trying to rescue a stalled treatment, crosses the line in a disastrous attempt to reach or heal an injured patient.

If we think in Winnicottian terms, the clinician's catastrophic move involves a collapse between the Environment (read Attachment) mother and the Object mother. As he conceived these personifications, Winnicott (1963) emphasized how

the mother as object, who may satisfy the child's urgent needs (id relation) and the mother ... who actively provides care (ego relation) ... are vastly different for the [baby]. It is the environment-mother who receives all that can be called affection and sensuous co-existence; it is the object-mother who becomes the target for excited experience backed by crude instinct-tension ... Failure of the object-mother to survive or of the environment mother to provide the opportunity for reparation can lead to ... splitting and disintegration. (pp. 74–75)

Winnicott was not thinking about boundary violations in these remarks, but it is impossible *not* to think about the combination of caretaking and romance that undergird the ordinary conditions of psychoanalytic work when reading this text. Typically segregated by culture and theory, attachment in the kitchen, eros in the dungeon—the two are here conjoined in a therapist's catastrophic fall from grace via the enactment of a sexual boundary violation.

Our culture of individualism, with its phobic dread of dependency, has severed romance from attachment, aligning eros with danger and agentic masculinity (“libido”), while attachment is consigned to childhood, weakness, and femininity. This is a split that is also reflected in our psychoanalytic habits of mind, as if Freud's rule were Law (“where they love they cannot desire, where they desire they cannot love”), the action and legacy of the incest taboo perhaps, still making its mark (See also Goldner, 2004).

Analysts, starting with Freud, have of course sought to enchant and complicate the relations between sexuality and attachment (“libido is object seeking”) in the same way that we sought to normalize the inevitability of parental eros toward the polymorphous baby (“I could eat you up!”) (See also Atlas, 2016). But analytic writing tends to cast off the “two-person relational” in favor of a “one-person demonic” in discussions of powerful sexual experiences, as evidenced by the appeal of terms like “shattering” and “deathly” in this material. Such metaphors seem driven by a cultural injunction which dictates that the erotic must never be domesticated by the relational, serving more like a manic defense – as attachment's foil, if not its spoiler (Goldner, 2006).

Perhaps this is why, courses in erotic countertransference notwithstanding, we can still become swamped by dread when anticipating the exploration of our patients' sexual lives. In pressing them to go beyond their comfort zone – to risk being undone in the service of analytic healing, we are enacting a kind of insistence that can actually summon a scene of sexual pressure. Consider how the discipline of our work involves, hour after hour, encouraging increasingly more intimate disclosures and risk-taking. We all know what it's like to judge wrongly, to ask for more than the patient can bear, to realize that our own desire – and dynamics – may have caused the patient undeserved pain and suffering (See also Saketopoulou, 2019).

As the Environment and Object (m)others circle around each other, the analytic partners must find a way to hold the tension between “talking sex,” an erotic speech act that materializes what it aims to explore, and medicalization, an anxiety driven discourse that insures that any emergent sexuality will be Dead on Arrival. The anxiety being navigated in this fraught space

vibrates around the question of what constitutes a boundary violation that occurs without touch. This is where things can become drenched in the confusion of “what just happened?” – a grown-up analog of the torment inherent in child sexual abuse.

Harming patients in this way is a common risk factor, especially as we all take on “sicker” patients, seek deeper cures, and lean into contemporary iterations of mutual analysis. These are the risks of practicing a ginned up “dangerous method” sequestered in a cloistered silo, cleaving to an “as-if” frame, with one foot dangling over the ledge.

Moreover, we all have been (or still are) patients – wounded healers with visceral sense memories of those times our own treatments failed, or worse, collapsed around us. Every accusation of a boundary violation disturbs the unsettled peace each of us has made with our own treatment history – each revelation serving as a stark reminder of the ultimate fragility of analytic work, no matter how honorably conducted.

For the analysand, an erotic enactment spells the collapse of the state of enchantment that suffuses the “real/not real” tension of transitional space, which is what gives imagination a chance. Coming out of this perverse scenario (a state of mental enslavement) is like escaping from a cult – instead of being helped by therapy, the patient has been consumed by it (See also Guralnik, 2020).

For the community, the revelation of a boundary violation destabilizes everyone within earshot (rumor and gossip travel fast), causing serious moral harm, but also placing a moral demand upon a professional collective not schooled – or prepared – to think and act as a group. Demonization and banishment serve to defensively separate “us” from “them,” even though each of us battles a queasy state of identificatory dread – there is always the criminal within (Dimen, 2016).

The weight of it all can feel like too much to bear, a burden made all the more toxic because sexual boundary violations carry not only the dread of rupture, but also a haunting of the uncanny, of the unthought known – an echo of the big bang that was muffled by all our fallen progenitors who married their patients in an attempt to morally domesticate the forces they could not resist (See also Blechner, 2014).

## SEXUAL ASSAULT (FOR FUN)

Unlike the sinister and solitary practices of sexual harassment favored by the likes of media titans such as Weinstein and Rose, Ailes and O’Reilly, Moonvees and Lauer (of course they had confederates), this form of predation is darkly social.

It is animated by a form of address Ken Corbett has dubbed “fantastic phallicism” (Corbett, 2009), a giddy construct that captures the way boys and men recognize each other via the manic exchange of daring acts – big, bigger, best. (“I-can-do-anything-better-than-you”). Driven by a dynamic we might label “homoerotic heterosexuality,” fantastic phallicism, in its infectious delirium, can become dangerously intoxicating.

The fantastic phallicism driving Brett Kavanaugh’s alleged high school sexual assault of Christine Blasey Ford is a case in point. (“*Hey we’re all dead drunk – let’s jump that girl!*”) The dynamics of the scene, terrifying to her, could have had very different meanings to him. Would he have actually tried to rape her on his own? Unclear, but unlikely. That would have been very dark – and solitary. This was dark, but companionable – a slovenly attack meant to be performed among friends. (*Look at me doing her!*) Blasey Ford’s subjectivity was of no interest

to Kavanaugh. She was just collateral damage – a thing lump thrown around in a phallic boys’ game of bad-to-worse.

The is the same vibe that assaults the viewer of a notorious video showing a group of high school football players (a self-described “rape crew”), doubled-up laughing as they relive their sexual assault of an intoxicated female classmate (ABC News, 2013). Deploying misogyny as an unremarkable, hilarious form of hatred, they drunkenly riff on the rape, outdoing each other in the shock appeal of their shamelessness.

One after the other, the boys, their giddy anxiety wrapped in dread, enact a desultory variant of a masculinity held together by matchsticks – always at risk, easily wrecked, violently retaliatory.

Their laughter is all the more chilling given the details of a similar assault committed in New Jersey in 2019 (Ferre-Sadurni & Nir, 2019). In that case, one of the boys, who was alone with the victim in a locked room, clearly did not see himself as enacting a private assault that could later be denied in a he said/she said postmortem. Rather he *filmed* himself penetrating her from behind as her dead-drunk head bobbed in synch. Later, posting the cell phone images, he texted “when your first time having sex is rape!”

The rape shares much in common with the Kavanaugh assault in that the victim was not an irresistibly “exciting object” whose time had come – but a girl plucked at random from a pool of partying teens who would ultimately be nothing more than roadkill, serving as a vessel for masculinity’s mark. (Before the teen was led into that locked room by the assailant, a group of boys actually sprayed Febreze on her buttocks, slapping it so hard it left bruises days later). As with sexual assaults committed by armies in wartime, the point is not to “have” the woman, but to “ruin” her – if that’s what it takes to grab a seat with the guys.

## THE FRANKEN PHOTO

One final example is Al Franken’s career ending, self-mocking selfie that went viral back in 2017. While it is important to note that *The New Yorker* journalist Jane Mayer (2019) has raised major questions about the rush to judgment in the Franken case, the photo at issue stands apart from Franken’s complex conduct toward his colleague.

A visual cocktail of joke and threat, the image shows Franken almost cupping the breasts of his sleeping colleague, LeeAnn Tweedon, while they were returning on a combat plane from entertaining the troops overseas. As he mugs for the camera, it becomes clear that this is a shabby trick, performed for the male gaze. His leering, sheepish grin marks it as an inside joke, meant to provoke an affectionate, identificatory response from the men who will instantly “get it.”

*(“I’m just another guy who can’t get the girl who thinks she’s too good for him – unless she’s unconscious.”)*

The action of the image is complex: initially confusing, then startling, then for a female viewer, shocking and stinging painful. In a thud, we realize we are watching a sickening betrayal by an apparently trusted colleague, a man with whom Tweedon apparently felt safe enough to let down her guard, falling into a deep sleep.

But as the image does its work, we also come to see how juvenile it is – as if it were performed in someone’s suburban basement, a comedic enactment of Franken’s erotized dependency on women, and the uncertain masculinity it reveals. Indeed, wrapped in



a pretense of adult irony, Franken's staged scene of symbolic predation erases Tweedon's seriousness of purpose as his professional peer, and turns the whole set-up into a variant of the "first time having sex" video.

*Hey this girl is out of it, look what I can (finally) do to her!*

### VICTIM = NOTME

Among the many reasons victims of sexual coercion are silenced, disbelieved, self-blaming and confused is because none of us (victims included) want to inhabit the victim position. In writing about rape, for example, Raymond Douglas (Douglas, 2017) a rape victim and a poet, begins his testimony with the following:

Rape Is Loss.

It deprives the victim of something vital, whose importance is only recognized when it is no longer there.

The change is permanent and irreversible. ... I am the worse for having gone through it. It was not a learning experience, a trial by fire, a challenge triumphantly overcome or ... an existential ordeal to be endured. ... It is a death sentence with an indeterminate stay of execution. (pp. 80–82)

This is part of why the rest of us want to look away, and those who suspect want to be wrong. The suffering of victims is too acute, too shameful, too proximate. (The injured/the abject/the Woman? Not Me/Never Me [Goldner, 2017].)

Truth be told, we all want to be (with) the shiny object, not the ruined one (*I don't like people who are captured – Donald Trump*).

Consider also in this light how Kavanaugh brayed at his loss of entitlement, incensed that someone as excellent as he would be denied the ultimate advancement by a softer-than-air accuser whom he barely remembered. Shaking with rage, while witnesses with damaging testimony were kept from the hearings, Kavanaugh was a stark contrast to Blasey Ford, a psychologist whose testimony was meticulously fact-checked, and found to be "heart-wrenching and compelling," but ultimately "mistaken."

Despite Blasey Ford's scholarly explanations of how traumatic incidents can be distinctly remembered, while contemporaneous details are lost, her devastation was apparently disqualifying, while Kavanaugh's ginned-up rage seems to have earned him lots of extra credit.

### VICTIM = METOO?

While it is true that sexuality may sometimes be lived on a liminal fourth dimension, where it is immunized from morality by the press of mutual desire, it is also true that desire can be commandeered by all manner of malignancies, ultimately coopting the erotic into a traumatic register.

Consider the porous boundary between consensual erotic play and sexual coercion. The eros of "sexual pressure" typically unfolds in a sexy sequence between leader and lead, powerful

and vulnerable, active agent and passive object. (“You *know* you want this ...”) But the erotic tension between sexual conviction and sexual uncertainty always holds the potential for a default from the eros of “leader/led” to the trauma of “doer/done-to” because “consent” and “submission,” “desire” and “entitlement” are states of mind that don’t sit still.

As critics of affirmative consent like to remind us, the truth of the moment is not necessarily a unitary or declarative “Let’s Go” or “Back Off,” but is just as likely to be messy, shape-shifting and ambiguous (“Push me”/“Wait for me.” “I *don’t* want this”/“I *could* want this.”).

Mutuality emerges when excitement trumps anxiety, uncertainty or shame, but it can also quickly disappear if one partner’s need for restraint is experienced as a narcissistic injury by the other, resulting in a default to coercion. Even sadomasochistic complementarity (“I like it when you hurt me [*in the right way*]”) can darken into sado-traumatic violation (“I insist on hurting you [*my way*]”) because the parties never fully know their intentions, limits and openness to persuasion – as if they ever could.

## SEXUAL EXCITEMENT

This is why consent is not only morally crucial, it is also erotically essential, since a conjoint sexual experience requires the synergy of co-authorship. Both partners must elect to leave their workaday selves behind, making space for the emergence of an aroused sexual alter who will co-convene the erotic situation with the outside other. In this sense, when one truly “consents,” it is not so much a matter of giving one’s *partner* permission to enact a specific behavior, but rather of giving *oneself* permission to surrender to an altered self-state for whom *that behavior would be welcome* (See also Saketopoulou, 2019).

Indeed, the transformation from one’s ordinary daytime self into the transgressive self-state of the erotic subject is the move that constitutes a sexual state of mind. This is the switch that is flipped – at will – by the sexual harasser, trapping his target in the spotlight of his gaze.

We can think of sexual excitement, then, as involving an encounter between a familiar subjective “I” and a lesser known “me” or actual multiple me’s who can be called forth by an incipient fantasy triggered by an image, a particular touch, an interior sensation or affect, an unconscious memory, by a dirty word, an experience of the other’s experience, and so on.

As the *mise-en-scene* unfolds and the crowd gathers, consenting partners must surrender to the developing erotic dynamic with the single minded conviction of a method actor. (Turning up the houselights even for a passing thought breaks the spell.) But if there is a rupture in the experience of erotic mutuality, the signal gets weak and the isolation depressing, which is when things can get rote, and potentially abusive – so as to gin it up, or get it over with.

By contrast, sexuality – done right – is truly treacherous. When the “I” one knows, meets up with “me’s” who have been locked away, but are now aroused and seeking the strangeness of their lover’s erotic counterparts, the resulting encounter can be a revelation – or a catastrophe.

The familiar and the novel, the body we know and need, and the one we discover and destroy – falling, tumbling, coming undone.

## SEXUAL COERCION

Sexual coercion is often enacted under just such conditions of ambiguity. We cannot legislate – or even anticipate—the psychic action of sensation, especially since arousal often occurs before the left brain can even begin to consider the question of whether to consent to an ongoing erotic process that has a will of its own. Moreover, as Saketopoulou (2014) has elucidated, pain and pleasure ultimately share the same erotic frequency, each needing the other in order to light up a sexual scene.

Under these conditions, the sheer messiness of sex makes it extremely difficult to hold it to account, especially since, in the zone of the erotic, we rarely want the things we should, and desire so often takes us by surprise. But when “feeling like *no one*” can be transformed into “feeling like the *only one*,” is it any wonder we prefer the lure of erotic romanticism, with its swampy lost-and-foundness, to the sobriety of feminism, with its unflinching absolutes?

How else can we live with the fact that we (may want to) hurt the one we love – or that we (still) love the one who hurts us? (Shame stalks eros, no matter how we try to spin it).

In the wetness of the rough and tumble of a sexual situation, consent and abjection, surrender and submission live in very close quarters, making “coercion” hard to disentangle. (How exactly did we end up over here, upside down against that wall?)

Moreover, in the white light of morning, the psychic action of *apres coups* can transform the meaning of last night’s sexual encounter. What had been ambivalently arousing as it unfolded in real time may now read, via a backdated feminist interpellation, as something much more traumatizing, perhaps even a “date rape.”

How can we process meaning that is forever in the process of sliding and re-arrangement as a function of shifting self and spell states, each aligned with contradictory ideologies, all of which interpellate new meanings backdated over the old? (See Guralnik and Ceccoli, this issue).

In that crowd of body parts, part-objects and self-states, who can say whether we want to be lost or found – or who consented to whom about what?

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## CONTRIBUTOR

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