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Reading for a Queer Sexual Ethics: Victorian and Contemporary Modes of Intimacy

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
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by

Miranda Steege

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Dissertation Committee:
Dr. Jennifer Doyle, Chairperson
Dr. George Haggerty
Dr. Emma Stapely
Dr. Susan Zieger

The Dissertation of Miranda Steege is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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"Reading for a Queer Sexual Ethics" examines how reading and writing queer erotic texts might help us construct a sexual politics capable of preventing harm and accommodating desire without succumbing to the white masculine fantasy of individualized, agential subjectivity. I pair nineteenth-century texts with contemporary queer erotic fanfiction, focusing on a specific sexual act or erotic dynamic within the paired texts. I examine anal fingering via Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* and ipoiledi's *Captain America* fanfiction, erotic submission via Victorian Spiritualist articles and memoirs and emungere's BDSM-themed *Hannibal* fanfiction, and edging via greywash's unfinished BBC *Sherlock* fanfiction. Each chapter considers a set of complications around sexuality and analyzes how written depictions of each sexual practice offer a structure through which one might grapple with how to ethically navigate these difficulties without falling back on oversimplified, undertheorized solutions.

Ultimately, “Reading for a Queer Sexual Ethics” argues that the process of preventing harm and accommodating desire within sexual intimacy requires continuing evaluations and reevaluations of specific situations and relationships: to strive for a robust, equitable sexual ethics, we must keep reading and writing our way through the difficulties presented by real-life situations. We must follow multiple trains of thought, succumb to digressions and diversions, retread old ground, and acknowledge that the urgent need for a queerer, more feminist, more antiracist, less ableist sexual politics will never be satisfied by reducing sex and power to simple and stable things. One way “Reading for a Queer Sexual Ethics” carries out its own argument is by playing a part in a larger project around sexual politics, which consists of a mystery novel about campus sexual politics and works of fanfiction that thematize consent, desire, and agency.

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Introduction

a note from Lu

In 2015, my English department fell apart. As a result, I didn't end up finishing my doctorate until about seven years later. The crisis and fallout required me to: replace all three members of my committee; completely overhaul the dissertation for the second time; completely overhaul my relationship to academia for the second time; serve on multiple hiring committees; teach multiple undergraduate classes per semester; participate in university-led sexual harassment hearings; participate in a police investigation; testify in a criminal trial; and go to a lot of therapy. I also wrote a novel based on what happened during those few weeks in 2015 when I went missing and everything went to hell, which you can read as part of this dissertation. Long story short, I've been extremely busy, but at least no one complained I was taking too long to get my degree.

The thing is, a lot has happened in the world since 2015. Particularly relevant has been the #MeToo movement, which has opened up the conversation about sexual misconduct to a much greater degree than when my department went through what it did. Our disaster took place pre-Weinstein and pre-Epstein and pre-Trump, but really only just, and that situates it very peculiarly either at the end of one thing or the beginning of another; and. Well. Not only did my dissertation have to account for my department's own shattering breakdown, it also had to account for the seismic cultural shifts of the following years. And what started out as a historicist reading of Victorian Spiritualism,

and then shifted to a literary analysis of erotic queer fanfiction, had to become something else again.

Here is that something else. Thank you, everyone, for your patience.

What I am Not Going to Do in the Following Pages

Let me begin with what this dissertation could have been, but isn't. This project is a response to some recent trends within mainstream feminism and online queer discourse about sexual politics, but it is, by and large, an indirect response. Right now, I am going to explain what these trends are and how they have impacted this project, and then I am going to leave them behind. They are the impetus for the project, but they are not its analytical focus. I will explain why shortly.

The mainstream feminist and queer discourse about sexual politics to which I refer occurs largely online, on social media sites like Twitter and Tumblr, in personal blogs, and in thinkpieces and popular journals, magazines, and newspapers. I have experienced this discourse as a loose set of ideas and worldviews that remain relatively consistent as they are applied to a wide array of subjects, incidents, and texts. I say "I have experienced" because this project is in no way a comprehensive sociological study; what I personally have encountered is deeply impacted by the particular sites I frequent, the online communities I in which participate, and what pages, blogs, or users I choose to follow. So much of what one knows about one's own corners of the internet is the product of cumulative engagement with a dizzying number of posts, comments, articles, clicks, likes, conversations, gossip, etc. etc., and it is not my task here to parse, sort, or

adjudicate this engagement. Rather, I want to articulate my reasons for taking on this project in a way that acknowledges their roots in the politics and discourse of a large portion of my social and cultural life.

Basically, the situation appears to me to be this: Mainstream feminist politics often champion consent as the singular solution to sexual coercion and violence[1] without acknowledging its limits or its entanglement in racist, classist, ableist, and homophobic cultural assumptions about who does and does not have full agency over their bodies. The pull towards standardized, universalizing social strategies[2] to prevent sexual harm pervades social media landscapes populated by self-defined progressive, inclusive, anti-discrimination queer communities. Many people and groups within these communities are, in my experiences over the last ten or so years, increasingly driven by a moralizing, totalizing politics of sexual purity. I will refer to this mode as "purity politics," though I am aware that the term is somewhat controversial, since at times "purity politics" is wielded against those critiquing racism in fandom and those working against sexual harassment in institutional settings. When I use the term purity politics, I mean specifically a dogmatic set of beliefs, expressed through a condemnatory, hyperbolic, and

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[1] See Joseph J. Fischel, *Screw Consent: A Better Politics of Sexual Justice*. Fischel does not argue that consent is useless—indeed, he thinks it should remain as the standard of sexual assault law—but he worries "that in the current moment of sexual politics—let's call it the Consent Moment—we risk collapsing consent into desire into pleasure, not (yet) as a matter of law or policy […] but as a matter of political rhetoric and quite possibly phenomenological experience" (1).

[2] I say "social" to differentiate from legal strategies, which are not generally the primary focus of the online communities which I describe, though an oversimplified understanding of legal concepts and definitions does pervade these communities' discussions of what is morally okay to do, discuss, represent, or fantasize about sexually.

evangelizing rhetorical mode,[3] based around the idea that (a) there is a narrowly defined and entirely self-evident way to have morally acceptable sex, (b) the ultimate goal re: sex should always be to protect "children"/"minors"[4] from the smallest potential of sexual harm,[5] and (c) all fictional texts must cleanse themselves of "problematic" depictions of sex and intimacy, or else they are directly responsible for real-life sexual harm. In "Purity Culture 2020," episode 320 of the podcast *Fansplaining,* journalists Elizabeth Minkel and Flourish Klink state that purity culture's adherents argue "that there is a direct line between fiction and reality. That problematic behaviors in fiction, whether they're abusive dynamics, whether they're things like rape, pedophilia, any depiction of them is inherently romanticizing them and that they are offering a blueprint for people to commit these acts in real life. And to normalize these behaviors and potentially not be able to spot them because they've romanticized them." Again, this belief is commonly expressed among self-identified LGBTQ+ people.

There are several negative consequences to this way of thinking. This set of beliefs leads to harassment and bullying, such as dogpiling on posts, hateful comments, and anonymous messages that often appropriate the language of social justice. It also

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[3] In fact, tumblr user freedom-of-fanfic relates this specifically to the prominence of evangelical rhetoric in the U.S., arguing that purity culture has a "classic black & white thinking structure that is strongly encouraged by American Protestant Christianity."

[4] Usually meaning anyone under 18, even if the "children" in question live in a place where the age of consent is lower. (As freedom-of-fanfic writes, purity politics is "very, very American.")

[5] "Harm" can mean anything from rape and abuse to encountering pornographic writing the "child" in question has actively sought out.

directs people's attention and energy sex and away from other potential vectors of inequality or harm in these online spaces, especially racism. Although some use the term "purity politics" to dismiss antiracist work, claiming it is equivalent to sexual policing, I would argue that purity politics as I have more narrowly defined it actually impedes antiracist work by stirring up a tremendous amount of outrage around a classic racist trope: the (implicitly white, middle-class) child threatened by the (implicitly not-white, not-straight, not-affluent) sexual Other. Additionally, purity politics makes actual anti-harassment work more difficult by investing in a fantasy of an entirely power-free sexual landscape which is safe because all the bad people and bad sex have been weeded out. Rather than grappling with the realities of sex—its inevitable entanglement with structures of power and systemic inequalities, its inherent risks even in the best conditions, and the messy, complex, and ever-shifting terrain of human desire and fantasy—this purity politics pretends that anti-harassment and anti-abuse work is as simple as creating a set of rules and following them, and ejecting from one's community anyone who disagrees.

To give a personal example of how purity politics operates: in response to a Tumblr post I[6] made arguing that barring fanfiction from ever depicting "problematic" subjects like rape and underage sex would eliminate fics that seek to interrogate and work

[6] [Miranda's note: This is where things get confusing. I'm writing in Lu's voice here, but I'm referencing a Tumblr post I (Miranda) made in 2019 on my fandom account, which I have not publicly connected to my actual name. This example is so useful to me that I am going to pretend that Lu made the post. I am also not going to cite it or the replies I reference, because I don't want to make the link between my fandom persona and my professional/personal identity easily accessible. I understand this decreases the scholarly value of the example to some extent; that's a price I'm willing to pay.]

through experiences of these subjects, other Tumblr users called me "so fucking stupid," "just a pedophile," and "a grown ass adult man defending cp."[7] I found deeply unsettling the frequent assumption within the responses that it is always possible to clearly delineate between works meant to critique forms of sexual violence and work intended to affirm the actions of those who actually engage in sexual violence; for example, "There's a difference between books that deal with touchy subjects and literal child porn written to be consumed as fucking porn." Even more disturbing, from the perspective of a literary critic and queer theorist, was the assumption that sexual fantasy (here in the form of erotic writing) directly determines what one does or condones in real life.[8] What these Tumblr users are in search of is a set of universal moral guidelines that can consistently define what sort of erotic work is "good" or "bad," guidelines that will construct a realm of absolute moral purity whose borders are defensible and citizens are united. Such an arrival, an endpoint, is neither practically possible nor, as these replies indicate, a goal that facilitates nuanced thought about the relationship between sexual fantasy, sex writing, and "real-life" sex—nor one that, for that matter, acknowledges the political

[7] I'm not sure where that particular user got the idea that I was a "grown-ass man," or that I write, as another suggested, "Loli-con Incest Porn Fic (Simulated Child Porn) Written To Sexually Gratify My Pedophilic Urges." (I am able to engage with these comments calmly now; the first time I revisited them to draft this introduction, my hands shook and my pulse raced with anxiety.)

[8] My post didn't even state a position on fics that "eroticize" rape or underage sex, just argued that a blanket ban on works involving these subjects would eliminate fics that deal with them in a critical, thoughtful way. The speed with which some Tumblr users jumped onto the anticensorship = saying works with "bad" sex should never be critiqued = condoning "bad" sex in real life = practicing "bad" sex in real life equivalency train was not surprising, but it did mess me up.

history of transgressive queer sex writing. I would also argue that universalized moral guidelines actually make it much harder to spot, deal with, and prevent actual sexual coercion, harassment, and assault, both because they render the imagined landscape of sexual misconduct misleadingly easy to navigate and because they disallow the possibility that those under eighteen may need help working through desires of their own that are not politically "good."

One might argue that the people hurling insults like "pedophile" at those who write about, say, teenagers having consensual sex are probably just trolls—that they don't genuinely believe what they say but are doing it to stir up controversy and attention. This is undoubtedly true in some cases. However, that doesn't make their rhetoric easy to dismiss, largely because it spreads like wildfire amongst those who truly, genuinely are trying to be politically "good," especially those who are young and/or dependent solely on the internet for queer community. The ringleader may not actually believe what they're saying, but many of their followers do.

Another objection may be: but how many people does this really affect? I suspect that some of my readers would object that I appear to be describing a rhetorical and political ecology that exists only in a very small, contained slice of the internet. In particular, those queers and queer theorists who were adults in the 1990s, and/or who experience most of their queer community in offline arts and academic spaces, may find this description of queer communities and queer politics both alien and alienating: bad, certainly, but easy to identify as wrongheaded and then abandon. As someone who more or less swallowed whole nineties queer theory during my formative academic years, yet is

too young to remember the AIDS crisis and spends a lot of time in online queer/fannish social media spaces, I can understand that perspective: "purity politics" *is* absurdly easy to dismiss. But on the other hand, its influence is, for the vast number of largely youngish queers who depend on the internet for much of their social lives, impossible to shake. I have watched queer people I care about, whose writing I admire, pull themselves and others apart because they want so badly to do queerness *right*. And these are not TERFs or centrists. These are people who proudly consider themselves progressive, trans-inclusive, and anti-harassment—not to mention antiracist, anti-ableist, and often anticapitalist—who end up bullying fellow queer people for depicting certain characters with the "wrong" gender presentation because they've been told that making gay men too feminine is stereotyping or that bottoming equates to weakness. These are supposedly pro-sex, pro-kink people arguing that enjoying fictional depictions of nonconsensual sex means that you support rape. It would be so easy to dismiss this way of thinking as absurd were it not that I have seen it demolish spaces that were vital to queer folks who have limited access to real-life queer communities and threaten an incredibly valuable (and enormous) tradition of queer sex writing via fanfiction.

I can "just log off Tumblr," as some urge when the "discourse" gets too bad, but what happens to the people who stay? And discourse on Tumblr bleeds back and forth between Twitter and TikTok and people's blogs and mainstream media and the internet at large. On *Fansplaining*, Klink notes that "just in the past year or so," they "think that a lot of this has come off of Tumblr and moved on to Twitter, and thence sort of into the larger discourse outside of fandom." Indeed, a number of mainstream trends seem to me

very strongly connected to the "purity politics" ecology of these online, often fandom-adjacent queer spaces. Some examples: the rise of trans-exclusionary "feminist" politics amongst those who consider themselves progressives; the suspicion amongst young LGBTQ+ people of the term "queer" on the grounds that it is a "slur"; and the demand that minoritized writers publicly share their identity categories and traumas in order to "prove" that it's okay for them to write about certain subjects or communities.[9] Not to mention the way that this rhetoric feeds into blatantly right-wing attempts to eliminate sexually explicit materials or anything LGBT-related from classrooms or to undermine protections for minoritized subjects on the grounds that political correctness has "gone too far."

Additionally, some recent work within feminist and queer theory on contemporary sexual politics chimes, albeit in a slightly different key, with the situation of "purity politics" as I have described it. For example, the "Sexual Politics, Sexual Panics" special issue of *differences* addresses the heightened states of outrage and panic that circulate around contemporary sexual politics within spaces like Twitter, mainstream media, and universities. In light of recent cultural crises around sexual politics—including the #MeToo movement, well-publicized sexual harassment cases in schools,

[9] It is probably worth noting one fairly controversial practice that I do *not* see as part of this trend: namely, the use of trigger/content warnings in classrooms. In fact, I believe that approaching challenging material with sensitivity makes difficult but necessary conversations more accessible. My objection to purity politics does not align with an objection to content moderation; it is not the sort of libertarian "anything goes" attitude that thinks neo-Nazis should be able to post hate speech on Twitter (nor, for that matter, the left-centrist panic that led the *Atlantic* to bemoan "the coddling of the American mind" in 2015).

sports, and workplaces, and debates about trigger warnings in classrooms—the issue attempts a cautious but "unwavering engagement with everything that we have come to know about the complexity and complicity of feminism, especially when it tries to make space for itself in the discursive venues of the political mainstream" (Wiegman 3). The assumption here is that it is worth using the tools of feminist analysis to engage with more mainstream feminist politics (although it is also worth resisting the urge to simply dismiss or destroy such politics). Scholars in this issue note a tendency, even within academia at times, to do something that is essential to the "purity politics" I have described: to envision a world in which sex and intimacy are entirely free from all power dynamics. Jennifer Nash's "Pedagogies of Desire," for example, interrogates how "women's studies—a field that has long engaged sex as a space steeped in power, hierarchy, and inequality—has come to invest in affirmative consent as the sexual ethic that can produce sex as a territory free of violence" (198). Kadji Amin's "Keyword 5: Pedophile" argues that in our current sexual order, "power and vulnerability structure our most intimate fantasies and pleasures," (66) and that therefore, "the task at hand is to transform our social and sexual worlds in ways that enhance sexual agency, particularly for the more vulnerable, without […] describing sex in a way that impossibly cleanses it of all relations of power" (68). This scholarship suggests to me that, though the issues confronting social media-based queer and feminist politics are hardly identical to those happening within academic queer and feminist theory, there is some overlap, and it is worth using the critical tools we have from the latter to address the former. And as Wiegman points out in her introduction, user-based media platforms "extend the logic of

the outrage industry in ways that multiply the avenues and outlets for outrage"; these ideas and affects spread (Wiegman 7).[10]

However: this is where I stop talking about purity politics. This project could have taken a very different shape; I could have dedicated it to analyzing and critiquing these modes of thinking, reading, and writing, unpacking their mechanics and articulating their problems. But while moralistic sexual attitudes in online queer and feminist spaces are certainly worthy subjects of critical attention, they are not the focus of this project. This is because, as much as my frustration with them has been a driving force behind this work, they are also a black hole, sucking all attention towards themselves, setting the terms of the conversation, provoking more and more and still more refutations to comments that are more often than not willful misinterpretations of one's position. It is easy to spend copious amounts of time doing things like, say, laying out the problematic legal history of the age of consent to explain why I do not believe the U.S. age of 18 should be the absolute border between fic that's "okay" and fic that "isn't," or arguing that although there is a relationship between what we read and what we do it is not a direct and transparent one, especially where sex is concerned.[11] But one of the biggest

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[10] Furthermore, the tendency of the authors of this special issue to return to work by Catherine MacKinnon and the "sex wars" of the 90s supports my conviction that there are many parallels between current online hot-button issues like written depictions of incest, rape, and so-called "pedophilia" and the hot-button issues of the "sex wars," like pornography and BDSM.

[11] For a particularly strong scholarly analysis of the latter subject, see Rukmini Pande, *Squee from the Margins*, ch. 5: "correlations between sexual acts and gender identity depicted in sexually explicit material and those of its viewers or readers are largely unstable" (166). Pande, Rukmini. *Squee from the Margins: Fandom and Race*. University of Iowa Press, 2018. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv7r43q4.

problems with the moral purity debates is that they leave no room for anything else. One is constantly defending oneself in advance, constantly explaining why one's position isn't "bad," constantly whirling around the vortex of manipulative rhetoric that sounds much more appealing than the long and nuanced explanations of why that rhetoric is harmful. For example: it feels much better and safer to agree that we should "protect queer children online" than it does to object to this statement based on the complete illegibility, without further context, of each one of those four words. Explaining why those words are illegible—what's a child? What online spaces are we talking about? What does "protection" actually mean, and will it, in practice, apply equally to all children?—takes a long time, and many people then turn around and dismiss the explanation for being too abstract and, therefore, a bullshit justification for "bad" behavior.

When one is constantly on one's guard, constantly responding and reacting, it's easy to forget the things one really wanted to talk about in the first place. What the discourse around moral purity does—not just the idea of moral purity itself, but the entire debate—is eliminate spaces for exploring the complex, nuanced, challenging, and often fucked-up nature of sexual and erotic intimacy, whether through fiction or critique. One must offer so many preliminaries, caveats, and preemptive defenses (not to mention the emotional effort of steeling oneself against potential abuse) that the substance of one's actual arguments and interests get buried. For instance, I may believe that a work of fiction depicting sex that may or may not be fully consensual can help us understand how real-life sexual consent operates, but I get so distracted by the need to prove that this belief is valid that the actual analysis never gets done. And it's not clear whether my

attempt to prove the validity of this belief will do any good, anyway. Wiegman asks an important question: "can we study our way out of outrage? Can we talk people out of outrage—or, more aptly, can you counter the power and ubiquity of outrage by positioning an analysis of it against it? (Wiegman 7). In my experience, such analyses often simply *reinforce* the position of those whose minds I am trying to change: to those whose beliefs are more about feelings than logic, a nuanced explanation more often that not reads like blowing smoke: a long-winded, abstract, unforgivably intellectual[12] way to justify the unjustifiable. I do think such analyses can be helpful to those who are on the fence, or have been harassed and isolated by adherents of purity politics, or are just beginning to explore their own queer feminist identities. But I also think they feed the rhetorical ecology of purity politics, which, after all, needs opposition to rally against. Engaging at all means one risks being turned into the common enemy whose very existence strengthens the bonds between those who believe they are fighting for an unqualified, uncomplicated justice.

So. This project is an attempt to sidestep what has at times felt to me like an all-consuming debate about moral purity in fiction in order to actually discuss some of the spaces of complexity and difficulty present in textual representations of queer sexual and erotic practices. I attempt this move in several different ways. One, I engage with texts that, under the rubric of moral purity, would likely be condemned, but that offer an alternative sexual ethics to the kind of dogmatic, black-and-white thinking of purity politics. Two, I refuse the kind of singular argumentation and universalizing that this

[12] Or "fake woke," as someone called one such post I made on Tumblr a few years ago.

discourse employs, instead moving through several different complimentary possibilities for sexual ethics suggested by a variety of texts. Third, I approach the major questions of the project through both scholarly and creative writing—another attempt to embrace the kind of multiplicity, divergence, and digression that sexual purity politics disallow. I am hoping that through a multipronged, multimodal, and sometimes frankly messy methodology, I can suggest that when it comes to contemporary sexual politics and ethics, we must acknowledge the complexity and nontransparency of desire along with the very real problems of sexual coercion in today's society.

What I Am Going to Do in the Following Pages

"Reading for a Queer Sexual Ethics" examines how reading and writing queer erotic texts might help us construct a sexual ethics and politics capable of preventing harm and accommodating desire without succumbing to the fantasies of gaining full control over one's body, achieving totally individualized identity, or eliminating all power dynamics that affect sex. By "ethics" I mean, roughly, a loose set of strategies for prioritizing care, both for oneself and others, when dealing in the realm of the sexual (whether that means actual intercourse or sexualized situations). And by "politics" I mean basically the same thing, but on a social rather than interpersonal scale. My work emphasizes the looseness of these strategies—their multiplicity, elasticity, and contingency. As noted above, mainstream LGBTQ and feminist politics, particularly as articulated on social media, often champion singular solutions to the problems of sexual inequity and sexual violence; they hold up concepts like consent or practices of only engaging with "good"

representations of intimacy as universal, absolute solutions to contemporary crises around sex, power, and violence. I will demonstrate that, on the contrary, the specificity of sexual encounters and situations undermines the efficacy of any singular, universal social rules intended to protect people, and that the complexity of the power relations (and imbalances) inherent in our current culture makes it impossible to cleanly divide relationships into powerful/powerless, particularly without careful consideration.[13] Mainstream LGBTQ+ and feminist politics also often fail to recognize the fundamentally troubling roots of concepts like consent and agency; that is, white Western property law, the historical tendency to restrict marginalized people's access to selfhood, and moral purity panics that in practice hurt minoritized sexual subjects most. The following chapters attempt to grapple with these roots: to examine the way they have a hold on how many of us experience sexuality, and the strategies we might use to either loosen that hold or twist it into something more politically and personally useful.

My method in "Reading for a Queer Sexual Ethics: Victorian and Contemporary Modes of Intimacy" is to consider specific sexual practices, as described within written texts, as potential models for a way of engaging with difficulties around sex and sexuality. I analyze the form of these practices—that is, their particular temporal and spatial structures—to consider what social and political possibilities each practice offers. I am strongly influenced here by Caroline Levine's work on forms, a term she uses to refer to "all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition

[13] Again, my argument is not a legal one. When I talk about "rules," I mean prescriptive social, cultural, and aesthetic norms.

and difference" (3). Levine focuses on what she calls the "affordances" of each form, a term she takes from design theory that refers to what a given material or design is capable of doing (6). She claims that "Each shape or pattern, social or literary, lays claim to a limited range of potentialities"—for example, rhymes afford repetition; networks afford connection (6). The forms I have chosen to analyze are those of sexual acts and practices as represented in written texts: anal fingering, erotic submission, and edging. These can be considered forms, I argue, because they are ways of arranging and ordering time and space, and because they have their own affordances: each contains the potential to facilitate certain kinds of intimacy and relation.

Levine's work is particularly useful because it emphasizes the portability of forms across time and space: they carry their affordances with them, whether they appear in, say, nineteenth-century Spiritualist séances or contemporary erotic fanfiction. Literary and social forms can survive "across cultures and time periods" and can move "back and forth across aesthetic and social materials" (5). "Reading for a Queer Sexual Ethics" pairs nineteenth-century novels, periodicals, memoirs, and journals with contemporary queer erotic fanfiction, primarily by organizing itself by form: each chapter is focused on a specific sexual form, and discusses materials from the nineteenth century and/or contemporary online fan communities under the rubric of that form. Although my organization is essentially formalist, I suspect that the reason these particular forms pop up in the ways they do across these two specific periods is largely historicist: our contemporary ideas about sexuality are strongly linked to nineteenth-century legal and conceptual changes around marriage, sexual violence, consent, childhood and adulthood,

gender, and race. “We ‘Other Victorians’” is what Foucault calls his readers of the 1970s, and it is probably apropos still.

There is also the idiosyncratic, personal answer to why I have chosen these materials for this project. I like working in these time periods, and I like these texts. They exerted a pull on each other and on me, and I followed it. I can dress this up in scholarly language—cite, for example, Elizabeth Freeman’s suggestion that queer readers tend to “gather and combine eclectically, dragging a bunch of cultural debris around us and stacking it in idiosyncratic piles ‘*not necessarily like any preexisting whole,*’ though composed of what preexists” (*xiii*). I could also relate it to the process fan studies calls “textual poaching,” a reading and writing practice in which fans use whatever primary texts they take a shine to as raw material to create their own cultural products more suited to their own needs and desires than canonical/commercial texts (Jenkins 26). Indeed, my mixing of time periods and genres is queer and it is fannish, but it didn’t originate from a scholarly conviction that this was the right way to go about making my argument—though I have gained that scholarly conviction over time. It came from a surprising stubborn streak in me that grabbed onto some stuff I cared about and wouldn’t let go till I paid attention.

Ultimately, though, the answer to *Why these two particular time periods?* and *Why these particular genres?* is, frankly, utilitarian: it is useful to read them together. I believe they tell us more about sexual ethics and politics together than they do apart. Through analyses of these paired works, I can argue that the practices of reading and writing offer space to explore sex, sexuality, and intimacy without erasing their often

complex, contradictory, and unstable natures. I can close read their depictions of sexual forms. I can consider what each form offers us, and how each form falls short. I can draw some lines between the affordances the forms offer for personal relationships and those they offer for a broader sexual politics.

This latter goal allows me to connect Levine's model of formal analysis with queer and feminist theory dealing explicitly with sex. Levine insists that form is political. She points out that "politics involves activities of ordering, patterning, and shaping," from designating what kinds of people have access to which spaces to deciding who is old enough to do what (3). If, she writes, "the political is a matter of imposing and enforcing boundaries, temporal patterns, and hierarchies on experience, then there is no politics without form" (3). In this project, I suggest that the affordances of these forms can be used to navigate certain difficulties around sex and intimacy, such as power imbalances, conflicting desires, the effects of trauma, and intense vulnerability. This understanding of sex as a way to work through personally and politically fraught issues derives largely from critical theory that engages with the political and psychological meaning-making within specific kinds of sexual acts and practices, especially writing by Eve Sedgwick, Leo Bersani, and Amber Jamilla Musser. In fact, my first chapter began as a response to Sedgwick's 1993 essay "A Poem is Being Written"—specifically, her concluding note to the reader: "Part of the motivation behind my work on it has been a fantasy that readers or hearers would be variously—in anger, identification, pleasure, envy, 'permission,' exclusion—stimulated to write accounts 'like' this one (whatever that means) of their own, and share those" (214). In many ways, the entire dissertation project is a response to

that invitation of Sedgwick's. She gave me "permission": to allow my own nineteenth-centuryist roots to twist their way up into contemporary queer theory; to combine close reading with structural political analysis; to focus on explicitly sexual material as a site of complex theorization. Her work underpins the entire project.

In addition to Levine's formalism and a Sedgwick-inflected queer theory, I also want to surface a third realm of theorizing that has shaped the dissertation, though this theorizing does not happen via academic (or even commercial) publishing. Queer fanfiction that uses explicit sex writing to explore intimacy, shame, power, and mental health has significantly influenced my understanding of sex, sex writing, and sexual politics. That influence takes the form of about a decade's-worth of my cumulative interactions within fan spaces; since fan culture is typically less invested in the clear separation between individual authors and ideas, it is less citable than most things, but I can note a few writers that have been particularly important in shaping my views on sex and sexuality: breathedout, ruinsplume, wordstrings (also known as Katie Forsythe), montparnasse, emungere, and greywash, the last two of which are authors of the texts I analyze in chapters 2 and 3.

The chapters in "Reading for a Queer Sexual Ethics" are organized around formalist readings of sexual practices: anal fingering, examined via Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* and ipoiledi's *Captain America* fanfiction; erotic submission, examined via Victorian Spiritualist articles and memoirs alongside emungere's BDSM-themed *Hannibal* fanfiction; and edging, examined via greywash's lengthy unfinished BBC *Sherlock* fanfiction. Each chapter examines a set of complications around sexuality—such as the

difficulty of determining one's own desires, the impossibility of controlling everything that happens to one's body, and the impact of trauma on sexual relationships—and analyzes how written depictions of that chapter's particular sexual practice offer a structure through which one might grapple with how to ethically navigate these difficulties without falling back on oversimplified, undertheorized solutions. I consider the affordances of each sexual practice, describing how its structure helps it prevent harm and accommodate desire as much as possible; I also examine the ways in which each sexual practice falls short. Ultimately, I am most optimistic about edging's abilities to allow for continued experimentation and cooperation in the face of of repeated failure, though each practice has its strengths and weaknesses.

Chapter 1, "Anal Fingering, or, Writing Queer Interiority from Lucy Snowe to Captain America's Ass," argues that anal fingering offers a framework within which to grapple with both the attachment to individualist models of the interiorized, agential self and with the limitations of such models. In this chapter, I examine two main primary texts, Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* and ipoiledi's canon of *Captain America* fanfiction, which represent a particular mode of eroticism that I identify as anal eroticism. Both these texts eroticize the way their characters voluntarily keep their excessive feelings and desires carefully contained, even as they seem to experience these feelings and desires exerting pressure, trying to break free. Anal fingering, I suggest, offers a fantasy of being pried open and forced to reveal these potentially shameful contents. This takes the burden off the self to do the hard work of self-exposure. When mutually desired, anal fingering can be a tool for navigating our ambivalent attachment to the fiction of the tightly-

controlled, perfectly individualized self, offering a temporary—and pleasurable—escape from trying to live up to this fiction. Yet, as these texts demonstrate, the structure of anal fingering has its drawbacks, primarily because it affords only a fantasy of exposure and opening up; it is ultimately limited in its capacity to grapple with the more problematic aspects of agency and interiority or provide models for larger-scale community and political engagement. Chapter 1 also includes some analysis of my own teenage diary, in which I perform a kind of anally structured eroticism around my own sexuality and the complicated desire I felt for/around one of my teachers. The diary allows me to theorize the centrality of reading and writing when considering how the affordances of sexual acts can be used to navigate sexual ethics and politics.

Chapter 2, "Erotic submission, or, Mediumship in Victorian Spiritualist Texts and Emungere's *Hannibal* Fanfiction," argues that erotic submission can allow for a loosening of the individualist model of selfhood, facilitating the experience of giving part of oneself over to another person, temporarily releasing participants from the psychologically taxing need to always be in control. It also provides some resistance to the more troubling aspects of agency as a concept, undermining its investment in white western property law, Cartesian dualism, and racialized, gendered, and classed models of selfhood. The chapter examines several specific erotic and/or sexual acts that fit under the rubric of erotic submission, including bondage, knifeplay, and what Spiritualists called "channeling." I analyze Victorian Spiritualist journals, memoirs, and articles alongside a work of NBC *Hannibal* fanfiction, "blackbird" by emungere that depicts the two main characters in a BDSM relationship. Ultimately, I consider some of the drawbacks of this

mode of eroticism, particularly the fact that it is potentially more easily accessible to those people already in some proximity to idealized Western agency, like white cis women or gay cis men, than it is to those who experience agency more as a total, almost entirely violent fantasy. It may also rely too much on the obliteration of boundaries between self and other, which can result in stasis or overwhelm rather than ever-evolving personal intimacy or political community.

Chapter 3, "Edging, or, Experimentation, Intimacy, and Failure in greywash's 'build your wings,'" argues that edging affords a more stretched-out, less climax-oriented sexual experience that can accommodate failure and repeated experimentation. I examine a 260,000-word work of unfinished BBC *Sherlock* fanfiction by greywash called "build your wings." Through close readings of this fic, I argue that edging can facilitate a flexible, resilient mode of intimacy that can accommodate conflicting desires, breakdowns in communication, and past trauma. I show how edging affords a different narrative structure for the sexual encounter than a sexual practice that privileges orgasm, thereby opening up a mode of never-quite-ending-possibility, urging participants toward a climax or culmination that is both imminent and constantly out of reach. As depicted in "build your wings," edging allows participants to weather the missteps and failures inherent in both sexual experimentation and developing relationships, letting them try again and again to understand and carry out what the other person needs. Additionally, I argue that rather than reaching towards some moment in which sex will untangle itself completely from power and violence, edging helps deal with the fact that sexual

encounters are inevitably impacted by cultural structural inequalities around things like gender, sexuality, race, class, and ability.

Ultimately, "Reading for a Queer Sexual Ethics" argues that the process of preventing harm and accommodating desire within sexual intimacy requires continuing evaluations and reevaluations of specific situations and relationships—that is, to strive for a robust, equitable sexual ethics, we must keep reading and writing our way through the difficulties presented by real-life situations. We must follow multiple trains of thought, succumb to digressions and diversions, retread old ground, and acknowledge that the urgent need for a queerer, more feminist, more antiracist, less ableist sexual politics will never be satisfied by reducing sex and power to simple and stable things.

Joseph J. Fischel writes, "Just as your car radio fuzzes out in a tunnel, so our thinking sometimes fuzzes out when it gets too close to sex" (29). This project is an attempt at clearing up that signal a bit and listening to what comes through.

The novel

There is, of course, a whole other part of the project besides "Reading for a Queer Sexual Ethics": my mystery novel, *Or Else*. If "Reading for a Queer Sexual Ethics" is driven by my frustration with purity politics as I have described them, yet does not spend its time critiquing them directly, it is also driven by something else I don't directly address: the events depicted in this novel, evens that occurred in the Schenley University English department in 2015. As I noted above, these events dramatically impacted my relationship to academia and scholarship and required me to overhaul my dissertation

completely. Yet readers of the novel may notice that neither of the two main academic issues the novel depicts—an overblown, destructive schism between largely idiosyncratic versions of so-called "historicism" and "presentism," or the (spoiler alert!) longstanding sexual harassment of undergraduate women by one of the professors—manifests as the focus of the dissertation. This work neither adjudicates between methodologies nor interrogates the workings of sexual harassment in institutional settings. Instead, it close reads *Villette,* Victorian Spiritualist texts, erotic fanfiction, and my teenage diary. These are texts that all engage with the erotics of power imbalances; some of them involve eroticized educational settings, pedagogical relationships, and teenage sexuality. My close readings of them push back against oversimplifying the dynamics of these erotic situations, locations, and relationships, refusing to: read teenage female spirit mediums as simply powerless in the face of older male scientific researchers; understand the relationship between a cannibal murderer and the man he lies to and manipulates as entirely predatory; deny that in some very real way, I was in love with my high school English teacher. Why? Why write something that appears to complicate or critique many of the arguments commonly used against sexual harm?

In short: because what happened here was terrible, but it wasn't simple. Because some of the young women considered their contact with this professor to be consensual, and some of them didn't, and some of them weren't sure, and every single case was an abuse of power regardless. Because getting rid of this professor didn't immediately set everything to rights. Because the structure of the university was set up to make it easy for

certain professors to abuse their power. And because the rest of us didn't see what was happening.

The obvious reason we didn't see it is that we were entirely absorbed in our all-consuming struggle for what we believed was the soul of the department. Really, the soul of literary studies, cultural criticism—even queerness itself. We believed other things were more important.

Another reason, though, is just as important. We forgot that power saturates the university whether we want it to or not. Institutional dynamics, professor/student relations, graduate/undergraduate relations, administration/faculty relations, can't be separated from our methodological and scholarly arguments. When Piper and Katie and Antonio and Phoebe and I believed we were fighting with our professors for the soul of literary studies, we were in fact fighting for our professors, on *behalf* of our professors, in their power struggles for control over who was hired and what classes were taught and what grad students were admitted; and there was no way not to choose a side and stay in the program. When all of us, professors and graduate students alike, believed that this fight was where the drama and stakes were, and we could leave the teaching of undergraduate survey classes to someone else because it was boring and simple and easy, we ignored that those survey classes were just as enmeshed in the power struggles of the department as anything else. We saw power only where we wanted to. We saw sex only where we wanted to—only where it was exciting. We forgot what Jennifer Doyle calls "the baseline awareness" from which queer studies begins: the awareness of "the violent operations of phobic disavowal, including the disavowal of the fact that we live and work

in forms of sexual community, whether or not we have sex with each other. The space supercharged with sexual anxiety is the space coded as 'not-sexual'; these are homosocial, deeply mystified, and hierarchal structures dedicated to the reproduction of wealth and power" (157-158). If we had done a better job of simply *paying attention*; if we had stopped pretending power was only present when it was obvious; if we had remembered that you can't fix an institutional structure by simply expelling all the bad guys—maybe, maybe things would have been different.

We can try to stop sexual harassment, coercion, and abuse by denying that there is anything erotic about power differentials, or teaching, or learning. Or we can acknowledge that these erotics exist, will always exist, and that understanding how and why and the way our personal relationship to them works will leave us more equipped to recognize abuses of power, to draw boundaries, to redistribute agency by restructuring the systems within which we work and learn.

Here's what drawing a boundary might look like. Take me, at sixteen, obsessed with books and not yet certain I was queer. I was in love with my high school English teacher. I wouldn't be surprised if she knew that. But it was okay. She talked to me at lunch when I finally decided I liked girls; she lent me Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* and Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*; she came to see the play I wrote about homophobic bullying on a school playground. She taught me the method I still use to take notes in books I'm writing about. And nothing bad happened. I agonized about my feelings, passionately looked forward to English class, and obsessed about her in my journal; she led Wilderness Club hikes and showed us *My Beautiful Launderette.* I got distracted by

the green-gold lightness of her eyes when talking to her in her office; she sat there and walked me through my paper. I can't extricate what she taught me from my nascent queer experience of her, but that's okay. She didn't abuse her power, and I wrote better essays because I wanted to impress her. During winter break of my third year in college, when the tumult of my confused burgeoning queer feelings about her had all but faded, I went to her house and drank unsweetened iced tea and ate blueberries and watched her younger son play in the backyard. And everything was okay. In fact, it was good.

The students harassed by the former Schenley University professor didn't have to be pure, virginal, or stripped of erotic desire to experience that abuse of power. They didn't have to feel themselves completely powerless or lack any agency whatsoever for his actions to be unacceptable. That's some of what I'm trying to get at here, in this dissertation. By really sticking with textual depictions of eroticized power relationships—sitting with them, close reading them, spending time with them—we can learn far more about how sex and power work than by denying that sex and power exist in anything but the most obvious and sinister of forms. As Doyle writes, "The antiharassment intervention does not expel sex from the workplace: it interrupts the disavowal of the fact that it is always already there" (159). The point isn't to *get it out*. We can't, and when we think we have done so, we are falling into what Doyle calls "the privilege of unknowing." There was a lot of unknowing happening at Schenley. I don't think knowledge and analysis and discovery can solve all of our problems; I'm too skeptical of paranoid reading practices for that. But I do think close reading can do political work. I do think that fifty pages of nearly uninterrupted focus on a work of fanfiction described by the

author as “psychological edging porn” can do political work (greywash 1). I don’t think those fifty pages—or the rest of the dissertation, or even the novel—will change the world in some significantly calculable way, or that they’re worth ignoring my students for. They’re worth something, though. I do, somehow, still believe that.

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Chapter 1: Anal Fingering,

or,

Writing Queer Interiority from Lucy Snowe to Captain America's Ass

This chapter argues that anal fingering offers a framework within which to grapple with both the attachment to individualist models of the interiorized, agential self and with the limitations of such models. Caroline Levine's concept of affordances is useful here: what affordances—latent potentialities—are offered by anal fingering? Structurally and formally speaking, I think anal fingering can accommodate several ways of experiencing and conceptualizing intimacy and eroticism. Anal fingering itself is not precisely a form as Levine understands it; it is an action, not an organizing principle. Still, the action is, I would argue, highly formal, highly structured—it is a particular motion in a particular place, constrained by the physical limitations of that place. There are a limited number of ways anal fingering can, as it were, unfold: a limited number of fingers, a limited range of motion, a limited depth of penetration. Its conceptual limits accord, I would argue, with these material ones, and can be analyzed formally just as well as, say, one might formally analyze the anus and/or rectum, which are more along the lines of the forms Levine envisions (enclosure, perhaps, or passage).

Anal fingering, I will argue, offers a few key possibilities for how intimacy, selfhood, and eroticism may be experienced and understood. The texts I will engage with represent the situation of anal eroticism as the tight enclosure of shameful contents that one desires both to hide and display. Anal fingering offers a fantasy of being pried open

and forced to reveal these contents, which is both humiliating and a relief, as it takes the burden off the self to do the hard work of self-exposure. It is, therefore, a useful tool for navigating some of the problems of eroticism's entanglement with gendered and classed structures of power, allowing the feminized subject in particular to navigate the double bind of the attachment to and frustration with interiorized and agential models of selfhood. Yet, as these text demonstrate, the structure of anal fingering has its drawbacks, primarily because it affords only a fantasy of exposure and opening up; it is ultimately limited in its capacity to grapple with the more problematic aspects of agency and interiority or provide models for larger-scale community and political engagement.

This chapter is strongly influenced by Eve Sedgwick's 1993 essay "A Poem is Being Written," which offers an incisive reading of the relationship between writing and feminized anal eroticism. In this 1993 essay, Sedgwick writes that very little has been written about female anality and argues that as a result, this desire, "already gendered" as male, might therefore "swerve," might "misrecognize itself" in order to "become meaningful" to women—but not without "leaving a trace of its own particular itinerary" (206). The connections she makes between anal eroticism, queer identity, and literary form are reflected in this chapter's methodology. Sedgwick's work on anal eroticism in "Is the Rectum Straight? Identification and Identity in *The Wings of the Dove*" also offers a model for the way I discuss it here. She describes James' preoccupation with the anus as connected not so much to the phallus as the hand (99). Anal fingering (and fisting) take on aesthetic and theoretical meanings; it reveals things about the novel's characters and structures the work on a sentence level. Most importantly, it is a site of navigating the

complexities of sex and sexuality, as when Sedgwick describes fisting as "productive" because "it can offer a switchpoint not only between homo- and heteroeroticism, but between allo- and autoeroticism […] and between the polarities that a phallic economy describes as active and passive" (101). I follow Sedgwick's example in considering the affordances of anal eroticism's structure as extending beyond potential sexual pleasure, into the realm of sexual meaning-making.

Leo Bersani's "Is the Rectum a Grave?" is another text which strongly influenced this chapter, although there are some key differences between Bersani's reading of anal penetration and my reading of anal fingering. Bersani's focus is primarily on penile penetration, for one thing, and is therefore less focused on opening up and more on the act of breaching and shattering. Bersani argues that anal penetration accords with a "radical disintegration and humiliation of the self," allowing men to experience a culturally feminized loss of control and identity (217). Bersani is not particularly interested in sex as a means of facilitating intimacy or knowledge of another person; rather, he argues that ideally, it "brings people together only to plunge them into a self-shattering and solipsistic *jouissance* that drives them apart," thus undermining the fantasy that sex can be a tender, equal interaction purged of power relations (222). While my reading of anal fingering does involve the desire for intimate connection with another person, I do agree with Bersani's refusal to imagine a sex stripped of power, and ultimately, I view anal fingering as a kind of never-quite-possible attempt at total intimacy rather than a successful one. Most importantly, I take on Bersani's understanding of how sex can be used to articulate power relations: rather than an

essentialist reading of anatomy (i.e. female=vagina=penetrated/violated and male=penis=penetrator/violator), the formal aspects of sexual acts can take on, can come to *mean*, certain cultural and structural power relations. Bersani writes, "those effects of power which, as Foucault has argued, are inherent in the relational itself…can perhaps most easily be exacerbated, and polarized into relations of mastery and subordination, in sex, and […] this potential may be grounded in the shifting experience that every human being has of his or her body's capacity, or failure, to control and to manipulate the world beyond the self" (Bersani 216). While Bersani's understanding of gender in relation to anal penetration is, if not exactly essentialist, still fairly straightforward in that men who have penetrative sex can experience "the suicidal ecstasy of being a woman," I have chosen a more literally gender-neutral act in anal *fingering* specifically (212). Biologically speaking, neither the anus nor the fingers are gendered, so theoretically anal fingering is available to any configuration of partners. This chapter certainly engages with the cultural associations of anal eroticism with gay men, but it relies less than Bersani's essay on the cultural association of sexual penetrability with feminization.

Nonetheless, gendered identity does, I argue, play a role in conceptualizing anal fingering. Levine argues that while forms maintain their organizing principles across different times and places, context is also important; "we also need to attend to the specificity of particular historical situations to understand the range of ways in which forms overlap and collide" (7-8). Hierarchies of gender and sexuality are forms that interact with the form of anal fingering, and I will attend to the effects of this overlap as I consider the usefulness of anal fingering in navigating intimacy and eroticism.

Specifically, I will engage with cultural constructions of the feminized subject as, firstly, peculiarly interiorized and, secondly, always struggling towards an agency and self-control that is perpetually just out of reach.

This chapter offers a reading of two primary texts: one, ipoiledi's collected *Captain America* fanfiction, which explicitly describes anal fingering, and two, Charlotte Brontë's novel *Villette* (1853), which (and probably this goes without saying) does not. *Villette* does, however, provide an extremely useful look at the model of the interiorized, not-quite-fully-agential model of the self that figures in my conception of anal fingering. It also, I argue, offers an example of a text that engages more opaquely with the mode of eroticism I have chosen to examine. Anal fingering *as a form* does, I will suggest, structure significant aspects of *Villette*, even though it does not make a literal appearance. It is useful to engage with a text that employs but does not explicitly depict this sexual act because doing so demonstrates how the form of a sexual act, though conceptually delimited by the physical affordances of the relevant body parts, can travel beyond sexual intercourse to structure social interactions, subject formation, and modes of intimacy. Moving between texts that depict explicit sex and texts that depict eroticism but not sex shows how the kind of formal analysis of sexual acts that I employ in this project is useful not only when considering sex very narrowly (as a clearly delineated act) but also when considering sex more broadly—its presence in various social aspects and arrangements, whether personal or systemic.

This chapter also incorporates a third primary text: my journal from 2006-2007, when I was sixteen and seventeen and a junior/senior in high school. This journal offers a

firsthand account of the problems I believe anal fingering as a mode is equipped to handle through its particular affordances—namely, the problem of constructing a self that is highly interiorized, yet wishes to exhibit itself; a self that is exercises strict control over itself, yet wishes for enough control to let this strictness relax. My use of adolescent personal writing to discuss female anal eroticism is, of course, modeled after Sedgwick's in "A Poem is Being Written." I find it useful here as an antidote to the sort of abstraction that can accompany critical analysis: when viewed in the writing of my earnest, aching, wanting younger self, it is clear how vivid, how high the stakes, how personally urgent it can be to try and find some structure through which to navigate the thorny, messy terrain of intimacy, sexuality, and eroticism, both in relation to oneself and others.

Interiority, Containment

The structure of anal fingering is one of entering into and prying open a small, tightly contained space. This space, I argue, is that of *interiority*: the space that holds one's innermost feelings, one's shameful burning thoughts and desires. Having interiority is not a natural human state; it is a cultural and individual construction, one way that the self may understand itself *as* a self. When one operates within the model of the interiorized self, one is a person because one has thoughts and feelings to which not everyone is privy.

In my teenage journal, I confessed to a fantasy of spontaneously crying in front of my high school English teacher. "I wished I could tell her all about my problems and thoughts and life," I wrote. "If I broke down crying in her class she would have to listen,

and think of me as a person and maybe better of me for seeing the depth." My sixteen-year-old self directly equates the exhibition of interiorized feelings with proof that I was "a person," one with "depths." Crying in front of this teacher would strengthen my subjectivity by displaying for another person not so much any specific feelings, but the fact that I had them. Yet I refused to force such an emotional eruption, and I found myself unable to experience one spontaneously: "But I never did cry." My desire for emotional exhibitionism was frustrated by the strength of the walls I had built around my thoughts and feelings. I was, I thought, too good at keeping them in.

I believed that displaying my feelings would make me a person. But, I think now, what actually made me a person—what gave me a coherent(ish) sense of self—was *wanting* but *being unable to* display these feelings. In other words, it was a selfhood constructed through the simultaneous desire to *hide* and *to be seen as having something to hide.*

This particular mode of selfhood is particularly feminized; it traces back to nineteenth century literature, which gave rise to the bourgeois subject who is characterized first and foremost by their psychological interiority. Nineteenth-century protagonists come alive through the depiction of an inner life, through the careful construction of the private self, as people who may conceal or reveal desires, thoughts, and feelings. D.A. Miller writes of the characters in *David Copperfield* that they "box themselves in, seal themselves off"; they "have simply put themselves away, in boxes that safeguard their precious subjectivity within" (201). I would argue that nineteenth-century female protagonists are particularly implicated in this mode of identity formation,

caught up as they are in cultural discourse around the private and the public. They are often figured as the private—synonymous with domestic spaces and interiorized emotion—while simultaneously they are expected to be emotionally and sexually available. Their subjectivity is crafted through the division between private and public, as well as by the problems and struggles it presents.

Charlotte Brontë's Lucy Snowe is a model representative of this mode of identity formation. In *Villette,* Lucy presents an intensely impassive face to everyone but herself: meek, compliant, and calm. Yet she declares early on that "I seemed to hold two lives—the life of thought, and that of reality; and, provided the former was nourished with a sufficiency of the strange necromantic joys of fancy, the privileges of the latter might remain limited to daily bread, hourly work, and a roof of shelter" (1853, 85). Her narrow external life is bearable if her internal life is allowed to flourish. She works hard to keep the latter in check, safely locked away. But she is not always able to do so. The desire to let her inner life escape its confines is strong, and Lucy's sense of self is built around the repeated process of secreting her feelings away, hoping they will break free, and then pushing them back down when they threaten to do so.

This process of identity formation is articulated with exceptional clarity in Lucy's description of her response to a thunderstorm while she is teaching at Madame Beck's school. She confesses to the reader, "I had feelings: passive as I lived, little as I spoke, cold as I looked, when I thought of past days, I *could* feel" (120). As proof she describes her reaction to the storm:

> At that time, I well remember whatever could excite—certain accidents of the weather, for instance, were almost dreaded by me, because they woke the being I was always lulling, and stirred up a craving cry I could not satisfy. One night a thunder-storm broke; a sort of hurricane shook us in our beds […] the tempest took hold of me with tyranny: I was roughly roused and obliged to live. I got up and dressed myself, and creeping outside the casement close by my bed, sat on its ledge, with my feet on the roof of a lower adjoining building. It was wet, it was wild, it was pitch-dark. […] I could not go in: too resistless was the delight of staying with the wild hour, black and full of thunder, pealing out such an ode as language never delivered to man—too terribly glorious, the spectacle of clouds, split and pierced by white and blinding bolts.
>
> I did long, achingly, then and for four and twenty hours afterwards, for something to fetch me out of my present existence, and lead me upwards and onwards. This longing, and all of a similar kind, it was necessary to knock on the head; which I did, figuratively, after the manner of Jael to Sisera, driving a nail through their temples. Unlike Sisera, they did not die: they were but transiently stunned, and at intervals would turn on the nail with a rebellious wrench: then did the temples bleed, and the brain thrill to its core. (120-121)

This passage from *Villette* carves out a subjectivity for its protagonist through the depiction of a normally repressed well of feeling and desire rising up momentarily in

order to be all the more severely cut down. Lucy's self-representation, here and throughout the novel, hinges on her ability to separate out what she keeps private and what she shares; and she shares very little.

Furthermore, this self-shaping is described in unmistakably erotic terms. Rough, forceful arousal from a passive state is followed by the violent suppression of longing; that suppression is resisted by the even more violent rebellion of that longing, at which point the involuntary leaking of bodily substance provokes intense, painful excitement: "the temples bleed, and the brain thrill[s] to its core." Although this may appear to simply describe repression, in which desire and sexuality are tamped down, I would argue that the tamping down is also a mode of desire—is also, itself, erotic. Lucy desires to let her feelings out, but she also desires to keep them in, and keeping them in generates, rather than suppresses, eroticism.

If Lucy Snowe's construction of interiority is erotic—a process of arousal, containment, and resurgence, as well as the structure through which her sexual desires are managed—I would describe its structural, formal workings specifically in terms of anal eroticism. Anal eroticism, like Lucy's experience of being a person, centers around forcefully holding in potentially shameful contents, feeling the pressure of these contents against the sides of one's inner self. The possibility that those contents might rupture explosively their encircling walls is (humiliatingly, erotically) exciting; but in the end, one often finds oneself too in control of one's restraining muscles to let that rupture occur. The push and pull of the need/desire to contain herself and the need/desire to let

herself go forms the basis, in this instance, of Lucy's sense of self, and the way she views herself in relation to other people.

This is a troublesome situation: it is not altogether pleasant. It is also precarious, because there is another obstacle to letting oneself go beyond the difficulty of relaxing one's muscles: the contents of one's secret self are, while admittedly potentially embarrassing, really quite banal. Miller succinctly articulates the paradox of private interiority: "I can't quite tell my secret, because then it would be known that there was nothing really special to hide, and no one special to hide it. But I can't quite keep it either, because then it would not be believed that there *was* something to hide and someone to hide it" (194). To put it more crudely, there's nothing all that special about shit. And to keep up the ruse—to ensure that others see one as interesting and full of depth--one must reveal enough of one's inner life to prove to others that there is "someone" there, but not so much that its contents are revealed as unremarkable, even superfluous.

And keeping up the ruse makes those unremarkable contents *feel* remarkable. As Foucault demonstrates in his refutation of the repressive hypothesis, apparent prohibitions against speaking of sex make it into "something akin to a secret whose discovery is imperative, a thing abusively reduced to silence, and at the same time difficult and necessary, dangerous and precious to divulge" (35). The *secrecy* of the erotic secret is what makes it erotic. Miller's phrasing above emphasizes the preciousness imparted to a "secret" interiority by the fact of its secrecy: concealment makes those contents seem "special"—and it makes them *feel* vital, alive, bursting to be let out.

Clutching to the fantasy of the "private subject," Lucy and my teenaged self walk a tightrope between revelation and secrecy. We must discover how to reveal the existence of what we keep secret without giving away those secrets themselves; we must also contend with the hot-coal feeling imparted by secrecy to those secrets.

Prying Open, Display

But there is another option: someone else could pry those secrets out of us. If the storm cannot rouse our desires to rebellion, if the intense inner feelings cannot rupture their own walls and prompt a burst of sobbing in front of the beloved viewer, we might fantasize about instead being forced—ruthlessly, lovingly—to open up. The solution, that is, of an interiority structured by an anal erotics of holding in shameful and explosive contents is to be fingered open.

I will use several works of *Captain America* fanfiction by the writer ipoiledi to consider the affordances of the anus being manually penetrated. These fics center around Steve Rogers (also known as Captain America, and here based on the version of the character from the Marvel films); they mostly depict him having sex with his lifelong friend Bucky Barnes. Anal sex in ipoiledi's fic usually begins with fingering, one character opening up the anus of the other to prepare them for further penetration. The asshole is usually figured as arousingly, riskily tight and thus in need of diligent, finger-by-finger attention. Formally speaking, the components of anal fingering offer several specific affordances. Structurally, anal fingering is the intrusion into and opening up of a small, tight entrance into a small, tight space—a space which, biologically speaking, has

no need to be entered, but whose entrance is capable of stretching far beyond its usual size. Unlike the vagina, the anus is naturally dry; some form of external lubrication is necessary, and there is always a risk of pain or tearing if the anus is not properly lubricated and stretched. Fingers are ideal for such preparation, as they are relatively thin and possess independent motor control; it is also possible to add more than one as the anus relaxes. Finally, anal fingering carries the risk of intimate contact with fecal matter, a risk that grows the deeper the fingers penetrate. Physically speaking, therefore, anal fingering offers several affordances: the anus contains and restricts, but can be stretched and opened; the finger probes and stretches with a high degree of precision, but requires care and lubrication and risks contact with fecal matter.

These physical affordances are also impacted by cultural associations around anal penetration. One, of course, is gender; as Sedgwick notes, anal eroticism is typically associated with men, specifically gay men—despite the fact that physically, neither the anus nor the fingers are the province of any particular gender. Additionally, sodomy has a long history of legal and moral prohibition. It is viewed as unnatural: the anus is associated with deviant, unusual sexual practices, rather than reproductive and heterosexual intercourse. Finally, there is the underlying presence of shit suffusing anal eroticism—the unclean, the dirty, the infectious, the disgusting.

These material and cultural affordances and associations around anal penetration make it a particularly useful site for working through interiority, shame, rupture, display, and forceful openings-up. Ipoiledi's fics use anal fingering to do just that. "The Pugilists," for example, describes a sex scene between Steve (Captain America) and his

partner Bucky that takes place because Steve is beating himself up for a superhero mission that almost failed and needs rough sex to help shake him out of his guilt and shame. At the beginning of the encounter, Steve's "whole body [is] held tense like a bow." He is tight, pent-up, refusing to address his feelings. They spar in the gym, fighting dirty, Bucky goading Steve. His aim is to get Steve to submit:

> Steve snarls, really pissed off now, and somersaults over and away. He launches himself fast at Bucky's back, trapping him with his big body, but Bucky elbows him hard in the stomach, once, twice, and finally throws him off. And then Bucky's on Steve, who thrashes, but finally after a hit to the nose Bucky flips him onto his belly and gets his thighs straddling him, his right hand pressing Steve's face into the mat and his left holding Steve's wrists together behind his back. Steve struggles, and finally, frustrated, kicks his foot to the mat.

Steve cannot simply let Bucky take care of him; he must be physically forced to allow himself to "let all that anger out." When Bucky finally begins to penetrate him, using his prosthetic metal arm, he comes up against the affordances of the asshole—its tightness and smallness that requires care and mild force to open up. In fact the fic suggests that fingering is the only way to get Steve loose: Bucky "could eat Steve out for hours—hell, he has—but not even that ever gets Steve to really unwind." Steve is "always tight, so tight Bucky thinks he'll suffocate." The tightness of his asshole correlates to his tightly contained mental state, both of which require a particular kind of precise and forceful penetration to loosen up.

The forcefulness is an important aspect of this penetration. As Bucky is preparing to put his fingers in Steve, he has to struggle: “The fight’s still in Steve, and he groans out loud when Bucky tugs his shorts around his knees, trying to get up on all fours.” When he penetrates him, he’s “not nice about it, because there’s only one way Steve wants it when he gets like this, and nice ain’t the word for it, that’s for damn sure. He slicks up his left hand because it’s colder, and shoves two fingers in right away.” Steve likes the discomforted of Bucky’s prosthetic fingers, “likes getting fucked with the cold hard metal.” He “likes it face down ass up, likes that he can try and fight back easier, squirm.” But physically speaking, anal fingering requires some degree of slowness and gentleness to prevent injury, so there is a balance between force and care as Bucky gets Steve to open up; he “starts to pull his two fingers apart, being real gentle, just stretching Stevie’s hot little pink hole open, wider and wider.” And this physical balance of force and care offers the chance for a similar emotional balance. Bucky forces Steve to confront the guilt and shame he has locked up tight inside himself, but he does so with love. He calls him “sweet” and “good” and “pretty”; when, after he fucks Steve with both his fingers and penis, Steve is “dripping come and covered in come and his whole face is a mess of bitten lips and almost-tears,” Bucky cleans him up and talks him through his feelings about the nearly-failed mission. By adhering to the physical affordances offered by the form of the finger in the asshole, Bucky is able to help/make Steve open and relax, letting out some of the shameful feelings he has been holding inside.

This use of anal fingering to help release intense interiorized emotions is also present in ipoiledi’s “Calisthenics.” In this fic, Steve finds himself badly missing Bucky,

who, at the point when this story is set, is on the run. His friend and fellow superhero, Thor, senses his sadness, though Steve does not explain why he is sad, since Bucky is officially considered dangerous and needs to stay in hiding. Yet Thor can still tell that Steve is holding *something* in: "You need not lie; nor should you feel obligated to reveal the truth. If it is a secret worth keeping, you are right to keep it. But you should not bear what weighs on you alone." He offers sex, which Steve, touched, accepts. Thor realizes quickly that Steve likes to be manhandled, and gets him on the floor: "presses his heavy weight down on top of Steve, Steve's cock flushed between their bellies, enveloped tightly in heat, and kisses him. Steve wraps his legs around Thor's hips on autopilot, and he rests his wrists by his own head, prone, letting Thor kiss him, and keep kissing him." This dynamic, of Thor being gentle but dominant, continues as they approach anal penetration. In a sort of mirror of what they are about to do, Thor opens Steve's legs in order to touch the insides of his thighs: "he's touching both in his hands, holding Steve's legs tight around his waist, massaging the muscle and skin. It makes Steve feel wide-open and hot and—and—soft, or, or feminine, he doesn't know, he won't think about it, but he is aware that he likes it, that he loves it, hands under his thighs, on the insides, stroking there at the soft and sensitive skin, forcing his legs open wider." Steve is "open," "wide-open"; Thor is both "stroking" gently and "forcing" Steve's legs apart. The fact that Steve's skin is particularly sensitive there accords with what Thor is doing for Steve emotionally, firmly coaxing him to relax his hold on his intimate, private feelings.

This dynamic continues when Thor begins using his fingers to open Steve up, "getting him to relax, and getting him to take it." As he does so, "'You can rough me up,'

Steve gasps, after a second, with Thor pressing another big finger up inside him. […] 'Rough me up, God, hold me down, just do it. I like it when it – ' Steve has to swallow hard. 'When it hurts'" (2015). The prying open hurts—both physically, due to the tightness and smallness of the asshole, and emotionally—and this pain adds to the pleasure Steve feels in it. He *likes* being made to open up. It helps him stop curling himself so tightly around his secret: "He's never been so—Christ—so open, so full, so—wet, so hurting. He can't even think past it, how spread open Thor has him this way, sliding into him, again and again, forceful without even trying." Thor's penetration sends Steve to a "spread-open, mindless place"; eventually, ipoiledi writes, "Thor's fucked him loose." Being loosened and opened up offers Steve some relief from the pent-up feelings engendered by the tightly-kept secret that Bucky is alive. The casual forcefulness of Thor's actions is particularly helpful; Steve cannot resist, meaning that he is unable to hold onto his sadness and loneliness in the face of the intensity of the sensation.

It is particularly evident in "Calisthenics" that the structure of the scene—the forceful but desired prying-open of the person being penetrated—is more important than the contents of whatever feelings the character has been keeping inside. The sex does not take place in the context of a romantic relationship. Thor and Steve are good friends having a casual encounter; Thor does not need to discover a specific desire or "true self" that Steve has hidden from him—in fact, Thor never discovers who it is Steve is missing in that moment. Instead, it is simply the process of being opened up that brings Steve arousal and relief. And it is the fact of being seen: the fact that Steve's need to open up, to display the tight containment of his feelings, has been seen.

The emphasis within anal fingering on being opened up is rather exhibitionistic: it relies on the eventual, if temporary, display of what has been hidden. Being seen is critical. I used to imagine that my high school English teacher could see inside my head. Because I felt unable to exhibit my feelings and desires in person, I fantasized that she could know things about me without me telling her. "When I had her for study hall," I wrote, "I was always aware of her and what she was doing and what I was doing and I thought more about what was going on with me emotionally because I wished she knew because somehow I thought that might make her like me more?" I wrote, "I was at home and thought about her and imagined her being curious about me (wishing she was) and what if she could see what I was doing right now? What would she think? What song should I listen to, what would best express me right now for her to see?" I wanted her to be the audience that would validate my sense of self. Yet I felt at the same time unworthy of her attention. "I wished I was brilliant for her," I wrote; "If I were she would see me." And I felt excessive, obsessive beyond what seemed acceptable.[14] I was *not* brilliant, not worth the audience.

Lucy Snowe is caught in a related dilemma: she, too, has an intense desire to display her feelings for others, but believes she is not the kind of person who ought to do so. In this, she finds herself in a common situation amongst nineteenth-century female protagonists of novels, whose sense of self—the specific structure of their psychological interiority—is shaped, as I have described, as a tightly enclosed space of carefully contained feelings always threatening to break free, and thus to be exhibited for others.

[14] I insisted, too, in an entry several days later, "that it's not about sex. Ever."

But this mode of subjectivity was fraught and difficult to maintain. According to Beth Newman, middle-class Victorian women were caught in a paradox: they were supposed to renounce the desire to "display" themselves in order that they might become worthy of being seen. Newman writes, "Very often the woman who commands attention, the love of the hero, and the novel's approbation is the one who refrains from being a cynosure…The Victorian novel is drawn repeatedly toward heroines who shrink from 'notice' even within their circumscribed domestic worlds"(3). Yet the cultural imperative to shrink from view came up against the desire to be "seen, looked at, noticed—whether we understand this as a manifestation of the drive or the effects of a competing social script," thus producing intense internal conflict for these women (15-16).

Lucy's participation in a vaudeville at the school's summer fête helps us understand how that conflict might be managed. M. Paul's insistence that she take over a role from a sick student results in what is perhaps Lucy's most theatrical expression of repressed feelings. Lucy's initially objects to the "public display" required (148). As noted above, Lucy is a private woman, who keeps her feelings locked up tight inside her. Yet M. Paul is forceful—"of the order of beings who must not be opposed" (151)—and furthermore, seems to see in her some hidden talent for acting: "Play you must. I will not have you shrink, or frown, or make the prude. I read your skull, that night you came; I see your moyens [abilities]: play you can; play you must" (147). She hesitantly agrees, and he abruptly locks her in the attic to learn her part: "to the solitary and lofty attic I was borne, put in and locked in, the key being on the door, and that key he took with him, and vanished" (148). Formally, being locked in a small room to practice expressing feelings

that will later be publicly displayed is quite in line with the formal qualities of anal eroticism as I have been describing it: a small, contained space full of potentially shame-causing emotion which is entered only through a tiny, hard-to-open hole.

When M. Paul comes to get her hours later and asks if she is prepared, she says she is, though "in truth, I was perfectly confused, and could hardly tell how I felt," but he is such a forceful, intense man that she is unable to do anything but comply with his wishes (151). She does, however, stick at one point: she refuses to wear men's clothes, keeping on her own dress. She says she must do this part of it "my own way" (153). Whether she wants to keep some aspect of her identity when onstage, prefers not to wear men's clothing, or simply wishes to resist M. Paul is not clear; but in any case, the result is that she maintains some control and some of her own identity even as she plays a part she was reluctant to play. Although M. Paul is forceful, he can bend enough to allow this. The fact that she retains some of her agency and sense of self suggests that the power dynamics of this situation are not entirely uneven.

Further evidence that at least part of Lucy rather *wants*—like Steve with Bucky and Thor—to be pressured into opening up appears as soon as she begins to perform. Her energy and passion, hitherto contained tightly within her, come rushing out. She describes settling into her role as "feeling the right power come—the spring demanded gush and rise inwardly" (155). Allowing her emotions out is described as an internal practice of letting go and of coming to the surface, of things buried demanding to rise. And what Lucy demonstrates is that this letting go is in part about display—about, perhaps, a tendency towards exhibitionism. M. Paul assumes she is nervous performing

in front of so many people, but her first speech makes her realize that "it was not the crowd I feared, so much as my own voice" (154). She performs very well "when my tongue once got free, and my voice took its true pitch, and found its natural tone" (154). Here, the display of her feelings is linked to the sense of her true inner self: her voice "true" and "natural"; her tongue, previously locked away like her emotions and desires, is now "free."

Just as being pried open leads to excessive, somewhat uncontrolled behavior from Steve—tears, moans, sweating, begging—M. Paul's pressuring of Lucy into performing leads her to lose her grip on her hidden feelings and display them for the audience. Lucy has been secretly pining for a man named Dr. John Graham Bretton, who is in the crowd that day; she has told no one and expects nothing to come of it. Yet when she realizes that her fellow actor, Ginevra Fanshawe, is "acting *at*" Dr. John, whom she too desires, Lucy begins to channel her own feelings into the part (155). "Retaining the letter," she reports, "I recklessly altered the spirit of the *rôle*. Without heart, without interest, I could not play it at all. It must be played—in went the yearned-for seasoning—thus flavored, I played it with relish" (155). She is almost compelled to do so, admitting, "I know not what possessed me" (155). She has hitherto been unable to show her feelings; only by someone else thrusting her into this situation are those feelings able to break free.

This suggests that exhibitionism is critical to the mode of anal fingering: the eventual or imagined display of formerly hidden emotion and desire is what makes it work. Yet it is a complex mode of exhibitionism, one that maintains a kind of hiddenness and privacy. The performance allows Lucy to express her feelings—and to prove that she

has feelings at all—without truly giving herself away. She pours her emotions out in front of an audience, but at the same time, they remain private, hidden behind the character she is playing and the lines she is reciting. Lucy's emotions, the desires that motive her and shape her sense of self, are mediated by text and performance. Reading the lines another has written both allows her internalized emotions to escape, thus reinforcing her sense of authentic selfhood, and ensures that they remain private. This accords with the structure of this mode of desire, which is such an intimate one, and one whose physical locus (the anus) is quite small and relatively hard to access. It is exhibitionism, but a peculiarly constrained kind, more about the fantasy of display than actual full, public revelation.

The exhibitionist stage of the fantasy is also a temporary one. Anal fingering does not allow for permanent loosening and opening; the hole closes, the container shuts. Despite the fact that her performance does not cause anyone to suspect her feelings for Dr. John, Lucy feels that in allowing others to witness even the fact that she has private, intense emotions, she has allowed too much to come out. She shuts her newly discovered exhibitionistic tendencies away: "A keen relish for dramatic expression had revealed itself as part of my nature; to cherish and exercise this new-found faculty might gift me with a world of delight, but it would not do for a mere looker-on at life: the strength and longing must be put by; and I put them by, and fastened them in with the lock of a resolution which neither Time nor Temptation has since picked" (156). Here, again, is the image of a lock: herself shut up with her feelings, no fingers to deftly pry her open.

Lucy cannot reveal that she has feelings because she believes she is not meant to be looked at; she is meant, instead, to merely look—to watch others' lives. Newman

writes that in nineteenth-century novels, “the repudiation of feminine exhibitionism is one of many ways in which feminine desire was made problematic” (3). Lucy’s moment of exhibitionism is a problem because it reveals that she has desires, period—it is not so much that expressing her feelings for Dr. John (even so obscurely) puts her desires at risk for discovery as it is that expressing any feelings *at all* goes against the role of passive onlooker that she feels she must fulfill. She figures her rejection of her exhibitionism as a locking away, putting her desire to express her feelings inside a closed interior.

But I would argue that this re-enclosure does not mean that opening up and displaying desire has had no effect on Lucy. Because the existence of her desires and feelings has been temporarily on display, it has been validated by an audience. Because those feelings have been and could again be publicly expressed, shutting them up inside an interior space of selfhood does not erase them, but makes them more important and more electric. They have seen the light once; they could do so again.

Lucy’s struggle to keep her feelings locked away causes her a great deal of psychological stress, and it speaks, of course, to the harmful effects of the cultural ideal of feminine self-effacement. It demonstrates, too, the Foucauldian process through which the desire to confess feels like a struggle towards liberation but is itself a construct of disciplinary modes of power. Yet constructing her self in this way also gives Lucy erotic pleasure and some measure of control over her social position. Newman claims that novels like *Villette* and *Jane Eyre* invested the cultural ideal of the self-effacing woman with libidinal energy, making the position of not being looked at erotically desirable (36). It also, I would argue, gives women the means to shape their sense of self by controlling

how, when, and to whom they display their feelings. Lucy longs to be forced out of her locked room; at the same time, she experiences a senes of power and control when she locks herself back in.

The emphasis on display—specifically, partial and temporary display—is present in ipoiledi's fanfiction as well. In "Late Show," Steve and Bucky are returning home from Thor's bachelor party. Bucky is teasing Steve for being aroused by the (female) strippers. But instead of depicting the bachelor party—an actual experience of public sexuality and exhibitionism—the fic creates a fantasy of it. When the men arrive home, Bucky gets Steve off against their front door before they go inside. They are clearly turned on by the fact that they are engaging in sexual behavior in a semi-public place; Steve dares Bucky to do it. Steve "pushes his tongue into Bucky's mouth and makes a whole slew of noises that shouldn't be heard in a public place, still wanting more and more and more." However, at no point does it seem remotely likely that anyone will catch them. Instead, the thrill of exhibitionism is transferred into a space of private fantasy in which they might engage in its pleasures without actually making themselves visible for anyone else. Inside their apartment, they continue evoking the proximity of other people while they have sex. Steve makes loud noises, and Bucky quiets him: "'Shh, hush,' Bucky laughs, breathless. 'Christ, Rogers. Neighbors'll call the cops.'" They play with the fantasy of exhibition and exposure, even with the disciplinary reining in that would come with being could. Yet it is merely play; when Bucky asks what the neighbors will think, Steve says, "Pretty sure […] They think I'm getting fucked." This play of display and containment, of breaking the injunction to keep oneself under wraps, occurs

only in the space of the men's private fantasy—no one calls the police, no neighbors bang on the walls. They thus maintain, like Lucy, the performance of exhibitionism without fully displaying themselves in reality.

The exhibitionistic nature of the men's private fantasy is emphasized by the main action of "Late Show": Steve stripping and performing a lap dance for Bucky. At the bachelor party, we learn, neither of them did anything but watch; alone in their apartment, Steve half-bashfully, half-brazenly mimics the strippers' moves. The line between wanting to hide and wanting to be on display is highly eroticized: "Steve swings a leg over Bucky's and settles himself down in his lap. He's embarrassed as hell and tucks his face into Bucky's neck, but Steve Rogers doesn't ever give up, and after a little self-conscious laugh that raises the hair on Bucky's neck, Steve's swaying his hips again." The usually semi-public actions of stripping and lap dancing are relocated to their small apartment, which is depicted as a dark, private place. The seclusion enhances the scene's eroticism: "There's only one real light on in the apartment, and it's the light just in the entryway above the door, and Steve looks so beautiful in the dim quiet of the night Bucky's sure he'll die from it." Meanwhile, Steve's embarrassment during the act indicates that even the pretense of publicly displaying his sexuality is fraught, both frightening and arousing, just as it is for Lucy. Bucky finds the experience all the more intense for its rarity: "His baby's always so shy about it, got to be asked sweet, over and over, but the truth always comes out, and the truth is he fucking loves it, no matter how red even thinking about it makes him turn. He loves getting put on display this way—but always for Bucky, only for Bucky." Sex makes Steve's "truth"—the intensity of his

desire—emerge. His longing to be put on display is further eroticized by the fact that he so seldom admits to it. And it is eroticized by the fact that Steve's exhibitionism remains, paradoxically, private. It is only in their small, enclosed world that he allows and enjoys it. "You just wanna watch," he accuses Bucky. "'Yeah,' Bucky murmurs, and kisses his mouth. 'Yeah, baby, you got my number.'"

While the act of anal fingering is not a feature of this particular ipoiledi fic, its structure is present in the emphasis on display and privacy, enclosure and exhibitionism. It informs the way the men navigate their intimacy, just as it informs the way Lucy navigates hers.

Reading and Writing

The portability of the structure of anal fingering beyond literal, actual sexual encounters is an important part of my argument about its uses and drawbacks when navigating erotic intimacy and sexual politics. I have chosen to focus in this project on textual descriptions of sexual and erotic acts. This is literary analysis, not sociology; when I consider the ethics of a particular sexual practice, I do so not through case studies of actual practitioners, but through fictional (or, in the case of Spiritualism in the next chapter, fantastical to some degree) representations of intimacy and sex. I am interested in how reading and writing practices can be the medium through which we consider how to navigate sex, sexual fantasy, sexual power, and sexual inequity both practically and conceptually. The following section helps articulate why.

As the introduction to this project suggests, I believe there is a definite, crucial difference between writing and reading about specific sexual acts and performing them; writing about rape, for example, is not at all the same thing as raping someone.[15] There is a gap between fantasy (whether comprised of words, images, or simply thoughts) and physically acting out those fantasies. However, I am hesitant to draw any cleaner of a line than this between "actual sex" and representations of sex. Fantasy is not *not* sex, even if most of the rules and ethics around fantasy are extremely different from sexual intercourse. Representations of sex so often engender arousal and sometimes accompany physical sexual acts, whether masturbatory or with partners. Meanwhile, sexual intercourse so often pulls in the realm of fantasy through practices like roleplay, dirty talk, or even just imagining things other than what one is actually doing. One can still talk about the specifics of sexual fantasy and written descriptions of sex, however, without deciding whether it is "actual" sex. Textual depictions of sex offer certain potentialities that physically having sex with someone do not. They allow for a large degree of play; they allow engagement with desires and practices that one might not want to or be able to carry out with one's own body.

They also allow a complicated balancing act to occur for the reader and/or writer: they are neither wholly public nor wholly private. This balancing act is particularly relevant to the structure of eroticism I have been describing in this chapter, which requires both a sense of hiding something and a belief that someone else knows one is hiding something. Reading and writing are ideal sites for this. The written depictions of

[15] See the introduction for why I feel the need to make this extremely obvious statement.

eroticism and sex that I have considered in this chapter imagine scenes of prying open and display that are in person and in real time. One lover touches another; the teacher sees the student cry; and the viewers of the vaudeville at Lucy's school watch her perform. But these are all hypothetical and/or fictional scenarios, existing only through their description on the screen or the page. It is risky to actually exhibit oneself for a live, present audience, and when the fantasy is one of having one's feelings more or less forced to the surface, it's not really possible to make that happen for oneself and still keep the fantasy intact. As I noted in my diary, I wanted to cry in front of my English teacher, but it needed to happen basically against my will, and it never did. I kept those feelings locked up tight, and only imagined them bursting forth.

Within the story of *Villette*, Lucy performs for an audience of students, teachers, and the public. But she is also writing a first-person narrative, suggesting another audience: her readers. Even when, within the story, she is alone, she writes with a consciousness of this audience. Miller writes, "Even when a character's subjectivity may be successfully concealed from other characters, for us, readers of the novel, the secret is always out" (205). And the fact that this secret is out is an essential aspect of the workings of the fantasy of anal fingering. The pleasure of self-display requires spaces of privacy—the bedroom, the inner self—which others cannot see, cannot know. These spaces give display its meaning and its charge. And someone besides us has to know these spaces exist; they have to know that *usually* we keep our feelings locked up tight for it to mean something when those feelings burst out. And if they don't burst out, it's even more important that someone else know we are keeping them in, and that they *could*

burst out, if the right pressure were applied. Writing gives us, at the very least, a potential audience. It is distanced from us by time and space, and may be only hypothetical, but we are conscious of it as we write.

For example, when Lucy receives a letter from Dr. John, her secret object of desire at this point in the novel, she takes it up to the attic, "bent as resolutely as ever on finding solitude *somewhere*"; locking the door behind her, she "dived into the deep, black, cold garret. Here none would follow me—none interrupt" (272). She ensures that none of the book's characters will witness the feelings and desires she is about to have by placing herself into the same locked, little room in which she learns her lines for the vaudeville at the fête. Yet unlike in the fête, there is no eventual in-story audience for Lucy's display of emotion. If she were simply to go up into the attic, read the letter, and never tell anyone about it, this would not fulfill the fantasy of being pried open that makes keeping oneself shut tight satisfying and erotic. However, through the first-person narration, the fiction that Lucy is herself the one writing for an audience of readers, her display *is* witnessed. We witness it. She describes her intense emotional response to the letter: "there was a fullness of delight in this taste of fruition—such, perhaps, as many a human being passes through life without ever knowing" (272). This reaction helps fulfill her erotic needs and shore up her sense of self because it is displayed for readers.

If Lucy Snowe, in her own exhibitionist desires, mobilizes readers as witnesses to her self-construction, I imagined readers for my (then entirely private) journal as well. I wrote that I felt, as I was sitting there writing, "as if I were being looked at, viewed…It seems as if I am posing for the camera." This sense of being watched felt prohibitive to

my writing practice: I lamented that "I have always written with the certainty of a future audience—myself, re-reading, later, cringing perhaps from embarrassment." I felt I could not express certainty about my sexuality in writing because someone was going to read it, and if I was wrong, I would be horribly embarrassed. The fact that feeling watched also *enabled* my writing practice is something that I've understood recently. Foucault describes in *A History of Sexuality* how the injunction to keep quiet about sex actually spurred on a proliferation of discourse about sexuality and furthered the disciplinary project of the formation of the self (35). The belief that one must keep sexual "truths" secret is what makes those truths seem so important. So the run-on syntax of my journal seems less artless to me now than it did then, the breathless *and and and*, *because because* of the lines quoted above[16] enacting a drama of confession, of feelings spilling out, forcing themselves onto the page. The very difficulty of confession, the potential shame of it, felt like something to fight against. It gave my struggle to articulate my sexuality, to enact queer identity-formation via reading and writing, its energy, its persistence, its urgency. When at long last I wrote the word "YES," it felt like a victory. It was also a performance: a display of identity-formation validated by an imagined audience of readers. For a moment, I pried myself open and displayed the burning questions, desires, and inchoate feelings I'd been keeping locked up. Just on the page, though. In writing, in private.

[16] "When I had her for study hall, I was always aware of her and what she was doing and what I was doing and I thought more about what was going on with me emotionally because I wished she knew because somehow I thought that might make her like me more?"

Well. Sort of in private.

Miller asserts that "Writing the self…would be consistently ruled by the paradoxical proposition that the self is most itself at the moment when its defining inwardness is most secret, most withheld from writing—with the equally paradoxical consequence that autobiography is most successful only where *it has been abandoned for the Novel*" (200). Nancy Armstrong also insists upon the centrality of the novel in the development of nineteenth-century subjectivity as private interiority. She argues that fictional representations of the self preceded—indeed, paved the way for—the experience of the self in real life. She writes of the nineteenth-century novel that "what began chiefly as writing that situated the individual within the poles of nature and culture, self and society, sex and sexuality only later became a psychological reality, and not the other way around" (13). Furthermore, the kind of subjectivity the novel constructed hinged on the domestic—on feelings, language, and the idea that public and private, personal and political, might be separated. Women were at the forefront of this transformation: while initially men "generally retained their political identity in writing that developed the qualities of female subjectivity and made subjectivity a female domain," in nineteenth-century fiction, this form of subjectivity spread, and both men and women "acquired identity on the basis of personal qualities that had formerly determined female nature alone" (Armstrong 4).

Fic writers do something similar. Fanfiction helps readers and writers navigate this kind of interiorized subject formation within a cultural landscape in which the divide between private and public has, with the development of communications technologies,

the internet, and social media, acquired new, increasingly vexed contours. Fic writers, whether or not they are writing what is called "self-insert,"[17] engage in a public-yet-private, explicit-yet-indirect performance of exhibition when they post on the very public space of the internet, yet under usernames most often not linked to their real-life identities, stories about intimate sexual encounters. Fanfiction, generally read and written in private but potentially shared with anyone with an internet connection, is a space where writers might play the kind of part Lucy does in the vaudeville, displaying their most intense interiorized feelings under an assumed persona that is neither fully anonymous nor fully transparent.

This navigation between anonymity and transparency is in my journal, too. Even in that ostensibly most transparent and personal of documents, I tried to distance myself from the intense well of feelings I imagined I was attempting and failing to pour out. I wrote in the language of self-analysis, describing the structure of my writing self rather than simply writing. In order to say what I felt I should, I hit on a peculiar rhetorical solution, which the following passage displays:

> "I can't let myself go, I am talking around ideas, keeping a part of my brain closed to certain words, thoughts, if they happened [sic] to surface. To make myself vulnerable, to expose myself on paper, to say things I might not even think are true. Well. I'm going to give it a try. Here's a story. About me? I can't decide.

[17] "Self-insert" can refer to fics with original characters (OCs) modeled after the writer, or, when used more broadly, fics that depict a canonical character as having similar characteristics as the writer.

"I was in love with my English teacher."

I narrativized my feelings, turned them into a story that might or might not be really "about me." The switch to past tense continues onto the next page and repeats itself in the following day's journal entry, beginning, again, with "I was in love with my English teacher." Although the feelings I was narrating were certainly current, placing them in the past allowed them to feel both removed from myself and more like a story. I needed this distance because I was not sure yet if I was queer, and because I was embarrassed by the excess of my attachment to my teacher. In addition to the use of past tense here, I tried throughout my journal to, as I put it, "write whatever comes out" faster than I could stop my "internal censor." Writing allowed me to both acknowledge and disavow a queer self by framing it both as a truth that needed to just "come out" fluidly onto the page and as a potential fiction I could take back later.

Writing and queerness are inextricably linked throughout the entire journal. If whether I was gay is one main concern of that document, whether I was a writer is the other. The agonized questions, digressions, case studies, and endlessly self-flagellating confessions that constitute this year's-worth of pages (which, significantly, comprise the only journal I have ever successfully managed to sustain) perform a drama of interiority around the inquiry into my writerly and sexual identities. I wanted very much to crystallize these confessions into an identity, a self: I had an intense, overwhelming desire to be both a writer and gay. This desire flew in the face of my deep suspicion that I was neither of these things. I accused myself, at sixteen, of manufacturing an interest in what I termed "homosexuality" in order to make myself interesting. "Yes, I've imagined

kissing girls, holding hands with girls," I wrote. "But is it simply an interesting story? … Deep down (and not so deep down too) I have this awful fear that I'm deadly dull. I want to be an artist, and I'm afraid I'm simply not." If I was queer, I would have interesting things to write about. If I was queer, I could be a writer.

The first entry of my journal, on October 29, 2006, begins its second paragraph with an assertion of my inability to write: "I am not even unique in thinking that my writing is shit, that I have nothing to say and no voice to say it with. I am not supposed to stop and think. I am supposed to keep writing. But I can't write anything. I can't I can't." And then I wrote for a year. I wrote myself into queerness.

"What else are teenage notebooks for, if not to prove later to the writer how much he or she has grown?" I wrote, daring myself to write that I was attracted to women. I have certainly not grown out of the attraction, and I suspect that I have not grown out of much else. What is this essay, if not a performance of interiority exhibited publicly, yet under the distancing framework of academic analysis? What have I done here, if not attempted to display the fact of an inner self while maintaining careful writerly control over what is actually disclosed? Surely this chapter is not merely a description of queer subject formation in general; surely it is yet another building block in the construction of my own. Proof, perhaps, that the structure of anal fingering can be useful as a practice of queer subject formation, or at least the twenty-first-century Western version, a narrative of self-discovery, repression, and eventual coming out.

As a practice of intimacy and care, though, I think perhaps anal fingering falls short. The fantasy it offers is that someone will, someday, realize you are keeping

feelings and desires locked up tight and pry you open, tenderly but forcefully, so you have no choice but to become vulnerable, to show someone else the "truth" of who you are. But what if no one does? Writing for an imagined audience cannot, I think, do everything that direct contact with another person can do. It is not necessarily *insufficient*; it is more that it can only represent something. Representing something is incredibly useful: it helps us figure out how that thing works, and it can offer its own very real pleasures. But the structure of anal fingering reinforces binaries between inside and outside, interiority and exteriority, and private and public that shore up a troublingly individualistic way of thinking about the self—the self as separate from the world, and separate from other people. Anal fingering is, perhaps, a useful strategy for dealing with our preexisting attachments to interiority and individuality. Goodness knows that I needed the structure it provided to deal with the experiences of living with the body and mind as I was taught to conceptualize it. I don't think, however, that it's effective on a larger scale. It is not a very useful structure for political organization or engagement; it doesn't encourage either community formation or direct action. At best, it seems to be a potentially useful way for individuals and small groups to release some of the pressures of a dominant queer and/or feminized identity formation that equates selfhood with secrecy and hidden truths and has a limited tolerance for displays of excess and eroticism. Its pleasures are many; yet by itself, it is neither sufficiently satisfying nor sustainably effective.

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Chapter 2: Erotic submission

or

Mediumship in Victorian Spiritualist Texts and Emungere's *Hannibal* Fanfiction

In the last chapter, I considered the subject whose relationship to erotics and epistemology is shaped by their simultaneous desire to be forcefully pried open and to keep their feelings tightly enclosed. This subject is intensely attached to the concept of psychological interiority, constructing both their sense of self and their practices of intimacy around the experience of controlling and failing to control the extent to which their internalized desires are apparent to other people. Yet they understand that there is a price to having a self only to the extent to which they have psychological interiority. If their psychological interiority works *too* well—that is, if they internalize their desires too successfully—they fail to achieve the intimacy they desire. I have argued that this problem is solved within erotic fantasy by the concept of anal fingering: the forceful, sometimes painful, yet desired opening up of the self. This concept is one way that erotic writing can help us articulate a more ethical politics of erotics and epistemology, as it makes room for expressing the frustration with the limits of the agential, in-control, always consenting body while suggesting a way in which these frustrations can be ethically met.

However, there are limitations, too, to what anal fingering can do. In addition to the frustrating fact that there is only so far one can be open or closed, anal fingering as a model for the self in relation to others relies so heavily on the binary of interior/exterior. It is attached to a fiction: the fiction of the single orifice, the single lock and single key. It

is insufficient to address the situation of a body and a self that is, as bodies and selves are, more radically porous, leakier, more malleable, more at risk of invasion and escape. It is in many ways the fantasy of the sixteen-year-old girl, like I was, self-obsessed, frightened of and desperate for exposure, imagining that her inability to reveal herself is solely her own failure, and that she is capable of closing herself up tightly enough that no one can get in.

In this chapter, I will consider the situation of the body and the self that is always already failing to control itself: one that cannot help but let things out and in. This self is extremely vulnerable in its propensity to take in and be taken over by external forces, and yet it is extremely strong, too, in its ability to absorb these external forces and not entirely lose itself in them. It is a self that desires the solidity and safety of a less porous self, and yet at the same time wants and even needs to be overwhelmed, to accept its inability to keep itself safe and separate. In some ways, it is a more extreme version of the self in the last chapter, but the crucial difference is that while the internalized self of the last chapter believes it is capable of controlling what goes in and out, this self knows that it is not. The fantasy of anal fingering is one in which the situation of being forced open is mostly a fantasy, something that one might agree or not agree to in practice. In this chapter, the self knows that full, ongoing, informed consent is simply not a consistent possibility. Consent cannot enable this extremely vulnerable self to maintain control over what happens to the body and mind. Therefore, this self requires a different fantasy to prevent harm and accommodate desire to the best of its ability.

The fantasy I will be discussing in this chapter is, roughly, that of taking the submissive role in a situation that is or is similar to a BDSM arrangement. This fantasy includes a variety of specific activities that engage the porosity and helplessness of this kind of subject, including bondage, breathplay, knifeplay, spanking, and sensory deprivation. While all have different specific affordances, all share some affordance through their position of submission. I will show that erotic submission within a BDSM or BDSM-like arrangement attempts to regulate the situation of the extremely porous self as much as possible: to draw a line between violence and sex, unwanted and wanted incursion, consent and non-consent, thus managing the problem of not being able to control what goes in and out of the self (see Bauer 2014, Musser 2014). Yet I will also argue that this attempt at a queerer, more ethical erotic relation falls short of its goals, too: it can never completely prevent harm or accommodate desire. This is because it cannot definitively draw those lines between sex and violence, consent and non-consent. A person's desires are often opaque and contradictory, even to themselves; consent, when extended beyond the immediate sexual situation to consider broader power dynamics, is not always clearly defined; and the urge towards self-annihilation and absolute merging with the object of desire cannot be fully accommodated within the model of "safe, sane, and consensual." Additionally, the submissive role is safest when accessed from a basic position of privilege and power—when the person adopting it has recourse to social and cultural standing to which they can return when needed, and that can shield them from the worst dangers of giving up control. It is perhaps most useful to those who stand on the edge between power and its lack—those far enough outside of the paradigm of white, cis,

straight, male, able-bodied subjectivity to recognize its flaws, but in close enough proximity to it to be able to rely on it when needed.[18] This is not to say, of course, that the submissive role cannot productively be taken up by those with much less access to privilege and power (see Musser 2014). In the situation I am describing here, however, the ease with which that position can help safely ameliorate the dangers and dissatisfactions of the porous and uncontrollable self is affected by the subject position of the person adopting it.

I will once again be considering a nineteenth-century iteration of this erotic position in relation to a contemporary iteration found in queer erotic fanfiction. Again, the nineteenth-century transformation of the self into a bourgeois subject with psychological interiority is a helpful site from which to ground this discussion, and contemporary queer sex writing shows us how we continue to grapple with the repercussions of this transformation today. For this chapter, I will use as the exemplar of the porous and vulnerable self the figure of the Victorian spirit medium, and a modern-day counterpart, the criminal profiler Will Graham from the NBC television show *Hannibal* (2013-2015) as he is represented in a novel-length work of fanfiction, "Blackbird," by writer emungere. This chapter is unusually long, and is therefore divided

[18] Amber Jamilla Musser's genealogy of queer scholarship on masochism in *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, Masochism* (2014) is particularly useful here: she argues that gay white male theorists like Foucault, Bersani, and Edelman have described masochism as exceptional, a position that can be voluntarily adopted in order to reject subjecthood and agency. However, this elides the question of difference: for people of color, especially women of color, masochism is a societal expectation, not a subversion. Musser argues that masochism is not always subversive, but instead can be read as a site through which to explore questions of agency, power, and difference.

into four discrete parts: the first establishes the medium as the exemplary porous self; the second considers the difficulty of consent when the self is so porous and examines BDSM and BDSM-like practices as possible solutions to the problems of consent and desire; the third considers the nontransparency of desire as yet another complicating factor; and the fourth examines how at least partial access to privilege (in this case, largely through whiteness) renders the solution of mediumship as an erotic mode safer and more accessible.

1. The Porous Medium

In part one, we will consider mediumship as the concept through which we can understand the extremely vulnerable, porous self. To some extent, this describes all of us, but it is particularly apropos for those whose circumstances, experiences, and subject positions make it especially hard to control what happens to their minds and bodies or to fit into the culturally dominant model of the individualized, self-knowing, self-possessed subject.[19] The medium, because their task is to channel other beings, is inherently vulnerable to invasion and forceful control. Perhaps the most culturally recognizable medium is the nineteenth-century spirit medium, who worked through séances, automatic

[19] I want to place this mode of selfhood somewhere between exceptional and universal. It is correct to argue that agential subjectivity is a fantasy no one can fully obtain; yet specific populations, particularly women, queer people, people of color, and disabled people, are culturally inscribed as porous, leaky, and vulnerable. While in fact this means that the majority of people within U.S. or British society are cut off, to differing extents, from agential subjectivity, this is nonetheless viewed as abnormal: white masculinity continues to be the standard, and everyone else deviates from it. So the particularly vulnerable, porous self, as I understand it, is both common and exceptionalized. It is also strongly impacted by difference: white women, for example, are not impacted in the same way as black women by these discourses of agency and its lack.

writing and drawing, trance speaking, table rapping, and spirit materializations. Much has been made of the vulnerability of these mediums, both due to the inherent risks of mediumship and the fact that many were young women. The nineteenth-century Spiritualist movement was sparked by two adolescent sisters, Maggie and Kate Fox, living in Hydesville, New York in 1848; later, some of the most famous mediums were young women, including the sixteen-year-old Florence Cook. And although their ranks included men, middle-aged women, and people of color, contemporary scholars tend to focus on the pretty young white girls who grew famous for communicating via ghostly table raps, speaking in the voices of the dead, and producing floating hands and white-draped spirits who walked about the darkened séance room.

Many scholars of nineteenth-century Spiritualism examine the particular ways in which youth and femininity impacted the cultural resonance of mediumship and its relationship to eroticism (see McGarry 2008, Owen 1990, Tromp 2006, and Warner 2006). Marlene Tromp goes so far as to focus solely on young female mediums in her book *Altered States*, as she claims they are particularly useful in thinking through the way social norms around gender changed as a result of female mediumship. Thus, all her objects of research are "attractive young women of English origin who evoked the questions about sex and sexuality that undergird" her study (14). Alex Owen, too, concentrates entirely on female mediums. These studies are attentive to how Victorian gender norms impact the power dynamics of mediumship, arguing that young female mediums rather paradoxically gained unusual amounts of cultural authority via the normatively feminized position of extreme passivity. Additionally, they consider the

difficult-to-read gender politics of the erotics of the séance room. Victorian mediumship, therefore, is already a fruitful site from which to consider matters of power and erotics—and a useful framework for thinking through similar contemporary positions of vulnerability.[20]

While there is still productive work to be done by focusing on the Victorian spirit medium within their historical and social contexts, this figure—exemplary as it is of a certain mode of porous selfhood and part of the historical construction of agential subjectivity—also offers us a method for reading contemporary texts that engage with vulnerability, agency, and the erotics of submission. Because mediumship so directly theorizes the risks and rewards of submission to a vulnerable, nonagential selfhood, it is useful in helping us think through the ethical valence of this submission in contemporary texts. In this chapter, we find our contemporary compliment to young female Victorian spirit mediums in a work of fanfiction, "Blackbird" by emungere, based on a television show that ran on NBC from 2013 to 2015: *Hannibal,* created by Bryan Fuller and starring

[20] There are obviously problems with focusing too much on pretty young white girls when discussing mediumship. We risk understating the ways in which middle-aged womanhood differed from youthful Victorian femininity, overgeneralizing about the gendered aspects of mediumship, and ignoring mediums of color. We also must be careful to note the racialized aspects of white mediumship, which often—as I will discuss later—relied on exoticized representations of "spirits" of color. With these doubts in mind, I have chosen to focus on young female mediums because their vulnerability is most culturally ingrained: that is, there is a prominent (racist, misogynistic) cultural narrative, both contemporary and Victorian, of young (white) women as childlike in their lack of power and authority. Challenging this narrative may help reduce its hold and enable us to recognize both the ways in which culturally less "powerful" subjects may have learned to manage their own positionality, and the ways in which white women have benefitted from their proximity to privilege.

Mads Mikkelsen as the titular antagonist. Our medium figure is Mikkelsen's co-lead Hugh Dancy, who plays the FBI profiler Will Graham.

Will and Victorian spirit mediums share certain things. In photos, they tend to stare with brooding eyes into some strange in-between realm that others cannot see. Their often pale faces are made paler by dark eyes and dark, mildly disheveled hair. Their lips are set in slight ambiguous curves; they look like they know something we don't. And they are pretty. They are pretty in their vulnerability, their delicacy. They know how to wait; they know how to open themselves up to others. They are haunted by their remarkable capacities and the responsibilities and pains that come with them.

Hannibal's Will Graham is a criminal profiler employed by the FBI. He has what the show terms an "empathy disorder," which makes him extraordinarily sensitive to the thoughts and feelings of others ("Apéritif"). He uses this capacity to profile killers: he stands at the crime scene and closes his eyes and pictures himself as the killer, while the camera shows viewers time moving backwards at the murder scene, until the point when the killer—now played by Will—commits their violent actions. Essentially, Will channels murderers. He allows them into his brain and body to the point where he feels as though he himself is carrying out their deeds.

As with nineteenth-century spirit mediums, Will's capacity to channel others affords him a certain kind of power while rendering him extremely vulnerable. In credulous accounts of Spiritualist practices, mediums can speak to the dead and carry messages both spiritual and sentimental to the living, but only by ceding at least partial control over their own mind and body. Mediums frequently fall into swoons and trances,

and mediumship could result in illness and exhaustion. They are sometimes tied up or locked in cabinets in order to prove they are not frauds. Similarly, Will's his work exhausts him and makes him sick, causing him to swoon and black out and lose time. Like mediums, he lives in close proximity to death. *Hannibal,* like nineteenth-century descriptions of vulnerable mediums, lingers over his vulnerable, porous, yet simultaneously strong, body. While spirit mediums sometimes worried about the influence of malevolent or too-powerful spirits, Will fears that his time spent with killers in his head will make him a killer. He has difficulty separating these killers' identities and desires from his own. His work is exhausting and stressful; it gives him headaches and night terrors. What makes this much worse is that, in season one, he is suffering from undiagnosed encephalitis, an illness in which the brain becomes inflamed, causing hallucinations, dissociation, and seizures. Will loses time, sees dead murderers, sleepwalks, and fears that he will one day come back to himself with blood on his hands. His work with the FBI clearly aggravates his symptoms. As the season progresses, his hair grows messier, the shadows under his eyes darker, his skin paler, and his eyes more haunted. The camera lingers lovingly over damp locks of hair and trembling fingers. Just as Spiritualist accounts often aestheticize the vulnerability of female spirit mediums, the queer gaze of *Hannibal* aestheticizes Will's loss of control.

In many ways Will evokes the nineteenth-century gothic heroine: Lori Morimoto's scholarly fanvid, "Empathy for the Devil" (2016), her accompanying essay with Evan Hayles Gledhill on the *Sheffield Gothic* website, and Gledhill's further exploration of the topic in "Monstrous Masculinities in the Gothic Romance" (2019)

parallel Will with the heroines of *Caleb Williams* and *Jane Eyre*, arguing that his resonance with these heroines helps "queer" the television show. They argue that Will's intense relationship with Hannibal (Mads Mikkelsen) echoes that of gothic heroines' intense relationships with the mysterious, potentially monstrous men with whom they fall in love. Will experiences many of the things common in female gothic, such as "gaslighting, hysteria, [and] 'forced seduction.'" Thus, Gledhill and Morimoto write, "Looking at the parallels between the relationships depicted [in *Caleb Williams, Jane Eyre,* and *Hannibal*], the older Gothic situates the modern television series in an historical frame" (Gledhill and Morimoto).

The Gothic heroine is a useful parallel, but by focusing instead on mediumship as a nineteenth-century precursor, we can consider how Will's remarkable capacity for opening himself up to the sensations, intentions, and emotions of others impacts his experiences of agency and power. Additionally, this chapter shifts focus from the show itself to a popular work of fanfiction, the 89,000-word "Blackbird" by emungere, that offers its own critique and transformation of the show's sexual politics by making the erotic relationship between Will and Hannibal explicitly sexual. At the same time, I want to reframe the discussion of nineteenth-century spirit mediumship's imbrication in questions of sexual agency and consent; I argue that by examining textual representations of séances by mediums, participants, and researchers, we can discover a complex engagement with the possibilities and limitations of an emergent concept of sexual consent. Reading these temporally and generically divergent texts together foregrounds

the things that representations of intense, intimate bodily practices can offer us as we navigate our contemporary cultural conversation around sexual consent and agency.

Scholars of nineteenth-century spirit mediums are particularly attentive to the ways in which the medium's vulnerability both facilitated and undermined her social and cultural power, and how it both reinscribed and subverted cultural narratives of women as submissive and porous. Alex Owen writes in *The Darkened Room* that "the issue of power and powerlessness lay at the heart of Victorian female mediumship" (233). Spirit mediums gained spiritual and social power by allowing themselves to be possessed by other entities, which expanded the acceptable range of social behaviors for nineteenth-century women. Yet, Owen argues, using mediumship to justify speaking in public or engaging in physical contact with strangers was not simply a subversive act because it reinforced the predominant cultural link between passivity and femininity. Because "spiritualist mediumship was a power strategy predicated on the notion of female frailty and wielded from a position of social inferiority," Owen agues that "the great irony of spirit mediumship lay in the fact that the most powerful medium was the most powerless of women, the final coinage of exchange being the apparent abdication of self for possession by another" (233). Hers was "a voice that could not be claimed. If mediumship was a form of contestation and subversion, it was one which ultimately could not be owned" (233). Owen dwells on the contradictory nature of female mediumship at length, unable to declare it wholly politically good despite its upsides.

A more thoroughly pessimistic view of female mediumship is Marina Warner's in *Phantasmagoria*. She views mediumship—in particular slightly later mediumship, during

the ectoplasm craze of the early twentieth century—as "ghastly and shameful" (304). This is because she sees it as an extended fraud on the part of scientifically educated researchers who facilitated "an exhibition of trance mediums at their most abject: mediums were not only for the most part female, but were clearly subordinate in social status and economic power to the psychic investigators" (304). These investigators, she argues, were overly invested in the vulnerability of young female mediums; they were "precisely attracted by the mediums' near-death states, in which they lost their self-possession" (304). For Warner, female mediums were mostly victims of exploitation by those who enjoyed seeing them in abject, non-agential states.

Marlene Tromp, on the other hand, takes a more optimistic view in *Altered States*; while she does agree that Spiritualist practices of passivity and openness were coded as feminine, she argues that the opportunities mediumship gave women, from speaking in public to increased erotic expression to more control over their lives, changed Victorian understandings of gender on a broader scale. The fact that the medium and the spirit became at times indistinguishable from each other was not simply a case of the medium ceding her agency and voice; instead, this occurrence formed a "site of fluid boundaries and metamorphosing identities" at which "change becomes possible" and "whole worlds—and not just those imagined by the Spiritualists—begin to shift" (Tromp 26). Tromp is not so much claiming that individual female mediums' experiences of passivity and powerlessness were somehow subversive as she is arguing that the results of this supposed passivity and powerlessness allowed for broader cultural change. It should be noted, then, that Tromp's view of Spiritualism's subversiveness is founded on the

concept of the agential woman: the ways in which mediumship allowed women to gain access to the public sphere, to assert themselves sexually, and have more control over their life choices. The blurring of the medium's identity with the spirit's and her passivity and porosity were, in Tromp's view, just temporary steps on the way to agential, individualized female selfhood.

Molly McGarry's work on U.S. American nineteenth-century Spiritualism in *Ghosts of Futures Past* acknowledges the particularly feminized nature of mediumship's representation, but also considers the practice of blurring self and other as a queer mode that does not simply vanish on the way to the individualized self. She writes that for Spiritualists, "the experience of seeing ghosts—of being taken up, with, and by another body—became a means of understanding subjectivity both around and away from the séance table" and that trance speaking and mediumship "was understood as the possibility of disembodiment and a kind of purifying transfiguration and release from the earthly, gendered body" (154). Thus, mediumship offered a queer, spiritual approach to selfhood that allowed for connections between various bodies and genders (176).

What is most useful in all these accounts is, I think, the complex negotiation of power and pleasure brought on by the medium's position of submission to spiritual incursion. There is no singular answer to whether this submission is politically "good" or "bad," or in fact whether it felt empowering or not to individual mediums. William Cohen writes in *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses* that experiences of intense porosity are not always the same: "the introjection of external material—perceptions, ideas, and feelings as well as things—can be imagined as bodily penetration,

and the range of such incorporation's emotional valence is wide: it can be arousing, frightening, disgusting, or exciting" (28). When it comes to the question of power and powerlessness, mediums tend to represent themselves—and are represented by observers—in the terms of sacrifice and martyrdom. They claim that they have been given a particular capacity that is more important than their own comfort, which is often compromised by their Spiritualist work. The introduction to the memoir of the English spirit medium Elizabeth D'Espérance, *Shadow Land* (1897), written by her friend and fellow psychical researcher Alexander Aksakof, frames the medium's journey as a difficult, unwished-for, yet highly important one:

> Endowed from birth with the fatal gift of sensitiveness, you, against your will, became a *medium.* Prompted purely by a feeling of duty towards truth, you did not refuse your help to those who were anxious to push further into the enquiry, in which you yourself became more and more interested. Soon you obtained very remarkable phenomena, and you were enraptured with the idea of having such palpable demonstrations of the glorious truth of immortality. What a consolation for poor, benighted humanity! (D'Espérance *x*)

D'Espérance herself reads the physical and emotional pain she went through as a necessary aspect of her struggle to bring spiritually enlightening communications to the world. She writes, "The most valuable lessons in life are often those which have cost us most suffering, and though I strongly resented the undeserved pain I endured at the time,

the lesson I learned has opened my understanding of the mysteries of spirit phenomena, better than a life time of success could have done" (294).

Will's journey is remarkably similar. He feels that his "empathy disorder" requires him to perform difficult work in order to help save lives. Throughout the show, Will finds it harder and harder to do his job, so disturbed is he by the violence he encounters and the way he must channel it through himself: "It's getting harder and harder to make myself look" ("Coquilles"). Like D'Espérance, who represents herself as suffering greatly for her work, he feels that he must not give up because what he does is so important to humanity. When Will considers going back to teaching, his boss tells him, "If you go back to your classroom and there's killing going on and you could have prevented it, it will sour your classroom forever"; after that, Will cannot bring himself to stop working ("Coquilles"). "Blackbird" emphasizes the distress Will's job causes him and his insistence that he must continue with it. In the fic's opening lines, Will expresses a wish that he "weren't real": just "Something they could wheel out to look at bodies and stick back in a closet after" (emungere ch. 1). Like D'Espérance, whose friends and family desert her for claiming she has supernatural abilities, Will becomes alienated from those around him. Both of them become ill because of their work—D'Espérance must take rest cures after especially difficult séances, and Will's encephalitis is aggravated by his job-induced nightmares and psychological stress. In "Blackbird," he believes that "clearing cases" is, in Hannibal's words, "the only measure of [Will's] mental clarity that's important to [him]" (emungere ch. 9).

Will and spirit mediums are obsessed with what they consider their main purpose: exercising their unusual capacities to uncover valuable truths that will help humanity. They also both feel that they have no consistent choice in the matter; they did not choose this extreme sensitivity and they cannot always turn it off. Agency, for them, is never fully accessible. The way their minds and bodies work prevent them from maintaining the subjectivity of the agential individual who controls what comes in and out of them.

Maintaining clear boundaries, and only engaging in fully consensual bodily practices, is very difficult for mediums. When channeling another entity, they must cede some control over their minds and bodies. That entity may then influence or use the medium however they like without the medium being able to stop them. Spiritualists worried about this influence; W.T. Stead, editor of the Spiritualist journal *Borderland*, reported that his spirit friend Julia wrote that he must "keep always the helm in your own control," as "it is quite as bad for you to be a corpse in the hands of a controlling spirit on this side as it is to surrender your will and judgment and individuality absolutely to the control of any spirit still embodied on your side" (Stead 49). Yet this was not always possible. In *Miracles of Modern Spiritualism* (1896), Alfred Russel Wallace describes activities like automatic writing and trance speaking as subject to such lack of control: "The medium writes involuntarily, sometimes in a state of trance, and often on subjects which he is not thinking about, does not expect, and does not like" (207). Furthermore, Wallace writes, "When the influence is violent or painful, the effects are such as have been in all ages imputed to possession by evil spirits" (209).

Will, meanwhile, worries about the influence of the killers whom he allows into his mind. This is a major aspect of his characterization in "Blackbird." Will confesses to Hannibal that "Sometimes I think about what it would be like to do it for real"—that is, kill someone (emungere ch. 2). He also admits that that while investigating a killer who raped his victims after murdering them, while he was "trying to get into his head," he "looked at the bodies of these women, the things he'd done to them, and I felt… I felt what he felt" (emungere ch. 3). He fears that his erection at the sight of murdered corpses, like other disturbing responses he has had at crime scenes, is not merely temporary external influence from the killers he profiles: "what if it's not them? Or not all of it?" (emungere ch. 3) He says he doesn't "do separation" very well—that "Everything bleeds together" (emungere ch. 3). It is difficult for him to maintain a sense of individualized selfhood because of his empathetic capacities.

This struggle is the framework within which the men's BDSM relationship unfolds. Will's admission that he fears he is blurring together with the killers he profiles is given shortly before the men discuss the BDSM aspects of their sexual arrangement for the first time, and Will considers it a reason Hannibal might not want to sleep with him; this connects Will's channeling abilities with his sexual life. The former, he worries, cannot be separated from the latter. The fic diverges significantly from the show in terms of Hannibal's response to Will's fear, which brings his empathy disorder in closer, more direct proximity to the questions of sexual desire and sexual consent. "Blackbird" maintains *Hannibal*'s initial setup in which Will begins his relationship with Hannibal as his psychiatry patient. Additionally, the as-yet-unsuspected Hannibal assists the FBI in

solving crimes, including some of his own. But the show and fic soon diverge in critical ways. In the television show, Hannibal increases Will's sense of helplessness and mistrust of his own mind in response to Will's fears of losing his sense of self. When Will starts having episodes of memory loss, hallucinations, and seizures, Hannibal realizes he has encephalitis, but rather than informing Will and helping him get treatment, Hannibal takes advantage of Will's deteriorating mental state to frame him for his own murders and to try and convince Will himself that he is guilty. He induces seizures, lies to Will about what he experiences, and, eventually, shoves a severed ear down Will's throat so that it appears Will has killed someone. Will, through Hannibal's manipulation, becomes overly dependent—and quite fixated—on Hannibal as he loses his sense of self and the already limited agency he initially possesses.

But in "Blackbird," Hannibal and Will's psychiatric relationship transforms into a romantic one, and Will hides his symptoms from Hannibal; therefore, Hannibal does not take advantage of his encephalitis, and although he considers framing Will for his crimes, he decides not to. Instead of enacting violence on Will's mind and body without his knowledge or consent, Hannibal dominates Will sexually within the structure of a mutual, consensual BDSM relationship. To some extent, this relationship separates consensual violent sex from "actual" violence, rerouting Hannibal's desires to hurt and consume Will into limited, consensual sexual practices. Yet Hannibal still does not tell Will he is a murderer and cannibal; Will does not discover this until late in the fic, at which point he must decide what to do. Now, the question that readers have been asking all along—

whether Will can in fact give full consent to Hannibal given Hannibal's secret practice of non-consensual, non-sexual violence on others—becomes central to the story.

By thinking through the ways in which spirit mediums negotiated consent given their lack of agency, their submission to spiritual incursion, their position in relation to psychical researchers and séance attendees, and their belief in the value of their often painful practices, we can attain some useful insights into the more openly erotic mode of submission that Will adopts in "Blackbird," and thereby consider the possibilities and problems that erotic submission offers within a contemporary attempt to locate a queer sexual ethics.

It is probably prudent to clarify here what this chapter is and is not trying to do. It is not making a legal argument about what behavior should be permissible or not: one of the things *Hannibal* does with its basic premise is transport the viewer into a world in which legality is always already a moot point, because Hannibal is a serial killer and cannibal. The viewer is not meant to make an argument that Hannibal's general criminal tendencies *okay*, legally or, I would argue, even morally (though some viewers may consider some of his illegal actions defensible). Instead, the viewer is meant to use the extreme, exaggerated world of *Hannibal* to think through questions of self-determination, intimacy, violence, individual capacity for choice, influence, etc.—things most people struggle with, albeit on a much less melodramatic plane. Additionally, I am not really attempting to *morally* adjudicate Hannibal or Will's actions in the show or in "Blackbird"; they both make morally and ethically indefensible decisions at various points. Instead, I want to use their extreme situation to consider what happens when

agency and consent fail us, and what recourse we might have when our desires pull us in (self-)destructive directions. Ultimately, the sexual ethics of Will and Hannibal's relationship—the ethics of erotic bottoming—are indeed insufficient to adequately prevent harm and accommodate desire, but not necessarily due to their failure to manage the intimacy between Will and Hannibal; they are insufficient because they cannot fully address the imbrication of sex and the world at large, and because they are, in this case at least, more accessible to those with closer proximity to social privilege.

2. Consent and the Medium

Will and spirit mediums evoke critical questions about the capacity of agency and consent to manage the erotic experiences of the porous subject. Consent is, of course, a historically and geographically specific concept. Pamela Haag writes in her analysis of U.S. American consent that modern ideas of sexual rights are "embedded in liberal concepts of proprietary selfhood" (vii). Consent and coercion—an act of agency and an act of violation—are the conceptual opposition upon which such rights are founded (xii). Feminism that centers liberal ideals like self-possession and individual equality, Haag writes, has largely failed "to comprehend the complex, ambiguous legacies of the liberal tradition regarding sexuality, identity, and violence" (Haag xiii). Emily A. Owens offers a history of consent that places it firmly within an Enlightenment political philosophy of the "self-possessed, autonomous subject"; this subject is white, male, and wealthy, and thus the notion of individual capacity for choice does not take into account structural inequality (Owens 150). Consent is rooted in the idea of contract, meaning that the expression of desire becomes a promise rather than "the articulation of a possibility that

might change shape over time or across contexts" (Owens 151). Thus, Owens writes, "insisting on the possibility of perfected consent culture banks on the promise that the tenets of liberal contract will save us" (150). But, as Haag writes, "There are forms of coercion or even violence in addition to physical risk that literal, or fixed, parameters will not contain, or accommodate. Once interpretive pressure is exerted on the word *yes*, its commonsense clarity evaporates. For as obvious as the word appears, it staggers under the weight of hidden complexities" (Haag xvi).

Spiritualist texts and "Blackbird" delve into these complex forms of coercion and the difficulty that language has in representing sex and desire adequately enough to maintain a clear, stable set of meanings around consent. They prompt us to ask questions that complicate the "yes means yes" model. Readers of these texts must ask: could spirit mediums (especially young female ones) really consent to what was done to them, either by spirits or by psychical researchers, given how they are represented as particularly vulnerable? Can Will Graham consent to violent sex with Hannibal when Hannibal is also secretly engaging in other intimate, violent bodily practices very much without the consent of the other people involved? Do the precautions described as taking place in the séance room—asking spirits permission to touch them and looking out for "spirit grabbers" who would seize spirits without warning—adequately protect the will of the medium? Does BDSM and Hannibal's scrupulous adherence to Will's safeword and constant checking in with his needs and desires adequately respect Will's boundaries when Hannibal is killing, cooking, and eating people without Will's knowledge?

"Yes" or "no" are inadequate answers to these questions. These texts engage with the psychological, political, and spiritual needs of the medium figure, suggesting that an already vulnerable subject might wish to use submission, despite its flaws, in order to attain some sort of fulfilment. They may "choose" to give up choice—or, more accurately, "choose" to concede to their already present lack of choice. This complicates the binary opposition between consent and coercion that Haag identifies as problematic, and answers Musser's call to consider masochism as "local and contingent": not "a portrait of power or sexuality in the modern age but rather a continued fascination with questions of agency, subjectivity, and difference" (2).[21] In considering the ethics and politics of erotic submission, we can problematize the concept of consent as a singular solution to the ills of contemporary sexual power dynamics.

In Spiritualist writings and in "Blackbird," consent and coercion are not mutually exclusive. Through these texts, we can do the careful work of sorting through the relationships between the many nodes of what one desires, what one agrees to, what one wants to desire, what one is capable of doing, what one fantasizes about, how one represents what one does, and what readers understand as "actually" happening. The practice of mediumship, in both Spiritualist texts and more metaphorically in

[21] Musser's focus is on masochism, which she defines as "usually understood as the desire to abdicate control in exchange for sensation—pleasure, pain, or a combination thereof" (1). I have chosen the term submission, which is not quite the same thing: sensations of pleasure and pain are often part of erotic submission, but it is the positionality within a power dynamic that I am most interested in. However, Musser's theorization of masochism, particularly her insistence upon its relation to social difference, offers a useful model of considering erotic submission as complex and contradictory, shifting in its subversiveness or lack thereof and dependent on factors like race, gender, and class.

"Blackbird," shows us that consent is simply inadequate to the task of managing all these diverse aspects of intimacy and desire—these aspects which so often do not line up, and which are not transparent to oneself or others. Yet these texts do not simply represent consent as not going far enough; consent is also overreaching, failing to accommodate all the desires, needs, and priorities of the participants in these intimate bodily exchanges.

I use these texts to critique consent not because I believe it should be discarded as a strategy, but because it is particularly important to queer people and people of color that we acknowledge the ways in which the liberal ideals on which consent is built, such as agency and individual subjecthood, are often inadequate, even harmful, as tools for managing one's life. It is important to consider how those without access to full agency and consent navigate their lives—what alternative priorities and strategies they may use, and the risks and rewards of each. Erotic submission is similar to Musser's masochism: "a site where bodies, power, and society come together in multiple ways. It can signal powerlessness, domination, or ambivalence depending on one's point of view. As such, masochism allows us to probe different ways of experiencing power" (1). Erotic submission may offer us a way to think beyond consensual/nonconsensual as a rubric for "good" or "bad" sex without abandoning the questions of sociocultural power imbalances or the need for minoritized subjects to exercise some control over their lives.

We have discussed the reasons that spirit mediums are represented in nineteenth-century books and articles as particularly vulnerable to violation both from spirits and sitters. At the same time, their vulnerability is what makes mediums appear powerful in these textual accounts of Spiritualism, both rhetorically, in that impressive feats are still

more impressive when described as coming from not-so-powerful people, and technically, because their passivity is represented as the mechanism by which they facilitate communication with the spirits. Maureen Moran articulates the paradoxical interplay power and vulnerability in her analysis of nineteenth-century depictions of female martyrs, figures who shared many similarities with spirit mediums. Moran writes that these depictions attempt to "hold contradictory cultural meanings about the female body in balance": martyrdom gives women spiritual power, but it also suggests that "the feminized submissive body is no more than an object to be acted upon" (Moran 481-482).

Representations of Spiritualist mediumship also grapple with this contradiction. They complicate what at first appears to be the mediums' relative powerlessness in the face of many Spiritualist practices, even when they are restrained, locked up, or unconscious. Certainly they offer depictions of mediumship in which the medium's submission aligns with cultural expectations for gendered behavior. The following passage from William Crookes' *Remarkable Spirit Manifestations* demonstrates this. Crookes, the much older psychical researcher who conducted experiments on and with the teenaged medium Florence Cook, is here attempting to view Cook and her materialized spirit, Katie King, at the same time:

> I went cautiously into the room, it being dark, and felt about for Miss Cook. I found her crouching on the floor. Kneeling down I let air into the lamp, and by its light I saw the young lady dressed in black velvet, as she had been in the early part of the evening, and to all appearances perfectly senseless. She did not move when I took her hand and held the light quite

> close to her face, but continued quietly breathing. Raising the lamp, I looked around and saw Katie standing close behind Miss Cook. She was robed in flowing white drapery, as we had seen her previously during the séance. Holding one of Miss Cook's hands in mine and still kneeling, I passed the lamp up and down so as to illuminate Katie's whole figure and satisfy myself so thoroughly that I was really looking at the veritable Katie whom I had clasped in my arms a few minutes before, and not the phantasm of a disordered brain. She did not speak, but moved her head and smiled in recognition. Three separate times did I carefully examine Miss Cook crouching before me, to be sure that the hand I felt was that of a living woman, and three separate times did I turn the lamp to Katie and examine her with steadfast scrutiny, until I had no doubt whatever of her objective reality. At last Miss Cook moved slightly, and Katie instantly motioned me to go away. I went to another part of the cabinet and then ceased to see Katie, but did not leave the room until Miss Cook awoke and two of the visitors came in with a light. (8-9)

The most accessible reading of this passage is, I think, is one of extreme gender imbalance and total lack of consent on the part of the medium: A man stands over a senseless woman in the dark and, holding her hand, examines her closely without her knowledge. The erotics are evident, but they are present only for Crookes, not Cook; the observing man, with epistemological and physical mastery over the woman, views her body and the body of the spirit, also female, whom he has recently "clasped in [his]

arms." Cook is a blank. She is "senseless"—not only not capable of relief or erotic interest, but not really even present.

These kinds of trances were common for Cook and other mediums. According to Epes Sargent's *Proof Palpable of Immortality* (1881), Cook was often awake during her early séances, but eventually Katie entranced her every time, "the purpose of which was simply to increase the power, and to prevent the mental activity of the medium from operating as an interference" (53). Sargent also quotes an account of a séance in late November of 1873 in which Katie supposedly explained where she went when she vanished at the end of a séance: *"'Into the medium, giving her back all the vitality I took from her. When I have got very much power from her, if any one of you were to take her suddenly round the waist and try to carry her, you might kill her on the spot'"* (62-63, italics in original). Her "vitality" has been drained, her "mental activity" silenced, and she is weak enough that simply to move her might cause her serious physical harm. She certainly cannot consent to whatever is done to, with, or through her in this moment.

Compounding the extreme vulnerability with which Spiritualist texts represent mediums at work, restraints were often used to prevent mediums from impersonating spirits. Frank Podmore quotes a *Daily Telegraph* article describing one of Cook's séances from the following year, in which Cook was shut in a small cabinet and "tied round the neck, arms, and legs to the chair, in a very uncomfortable and apparently secure manner"; after the appearance of a ghostly face, "the doors were opened, and little Miss Blank was found still tied, with seals unbroken, and to all appearance in a deep sleep" (98). During these manifestations, then, every effort was taken to disable the medium, both in order to

allow the spirit unfettered access to her mind and body and to prove that she was not, in fact, simply impersonating spirits.

Furthermore, it is difficult not to read the extreme vulnerability of Cook senseless on the floor with Crookes standing over her as having a sexual valence, making the issue of consent even more obviously present. In a similar account, he writes that upon walking into the room, "I found Miss Cook had slipped partially off the sofa, and her head was hanging in a very awkward position. I lifted her onto the sofa, and in so doing had satisfactory evidence, in spite of the darkness, that Miss Cook was not attired in the 'Katie costume,' but had on her ordinary black velvet dress, and was in a deep trance" (7). Cook's recumbent position, the privacy of the room, and Crookes' manipulation and examination of Cook's body and clothes suggest sexual vulnerability and an extreme imbalance of power between her and Crookes.

Add to that the difference in their ages and social positions, and it is clear why even scholars optimistic about the opportunities mediumship offered women see the practice of constraining mediums as "enforced denigration," as Alex Owen calls it (231). She argues that "the motif of male mastery surfaced around the relationship between psychical researchers and lower-class mediums in an expression of sexual and class difference. Female powerlessness was especially evident in these bondage rituals" (231). Meanwhile, Marlene Tromp sets the practice against the more empowering aspects of female mediumship, citing it as evidence that mediumship "was not simply liberatory for the women involved…In test séances, mediums were bound to a chair in the darkened cabinet, often with leather straps, chains, and padlocks, to await the arrival of the

spirits…Like sacrificial virgins, the mediums were surveilled and controlled prior to the séance in ways that exceeded the social limits" (46).

There validity in this reading, but it is an incomplete one, even beyond its reluctance to consider the possibility that mediums themselves found these practices of submission worthwhile or even pleasurable. The reading of the medium as totally without power or control in such moments does not account for the presence of the spirit and its relationship to the medium. Granted, most of us probably do not believe Katie King was "actually" in the room with Florence Cook; we may also doubt that the spirit mediums, researchers, and séance participants truly believed in spirits themselves. However, whatever the authors of Spiritualist journals and books may have believed, the texts represent the spirits as critically important, and it is worth taking seriously how they are portrayed. In this case, Katie's presence in the room with Crookes and the recumbent Cook significantly changes the power dynamics of the situation. Katie exists as an intermediary between Cook and Crookes, safeguarding Cook in her vulnerable state; even more, because spirit manifestations are understood to be composed of matter and thoughts from the medium, not all of Cook is actually in a powerless swoon. Some of her is animating the very active Katie King.

In this particular passage, Katie is "standing close behind Miss Cook." She "move[s] her head and smile[s] in recognition" when she sees Crookes. When Cook begins moving, Katie "instantly motion[s Crookes] to go away." Although Crookes does not leave the room, he does go to "another part of the cabinet and then cease[s] to see

Katie." She stands watch over Cook; she tells Crookes to stop examining her when Cook begins to stir—and he does.

At another séance from that same year, Crookes describes playing the role of Cook's protector once again: she beckons to him,

> saying, "Come into the room and lift my medium's head up; she has slipped down." Katie was then standing before me clothed in her usual white robe and turban head-dress. I immediately walked into the library up to Miss Cook, Katie stepping aside to allow me to pass. I found Miss Cook had slipped partially off the sofa, and her head was hanging in a very awkward position. I lifted her onto the sofa, and in so doing had satisfactory evidence, in spite of the darkness, that Miss Cook was not attired in the 'Katie costume,' but had on her ordinary black velvet dress, and was in a deep trance. (6-7)

Katie ensures that Cook, while in her trance, is not uncomfortable; she "allow[s]" Crookes to come and adjust her position as she supervises. Cook is represented, then, as having an intermediary between her and Crookes, another young woman who ensures she is safe and whose instructions Crookes respects. Indeed, according to the logic of Spiritualism, he *must* respect her instructions, because if he does not, Katie will not materialize, and then the Crookes will have nothing to study.

Katie is more than Cook's guardian, however; her intimate relationship to Cook's mind and body suggests Cook is not quite so absent from these scenes as it appears. This is most apparent in the physical similarities between Katie and Cook, which keep Cook's

role in the proceedings at the forefront of participants' minds. Because skeptics accused Cook of simply impersonating Katie, accounts of her séances spend a good deal of time describing the two women side by side, pointing out both differences and similarities. For example, an account by a séance attendee named G.L. Ditson, quoted in Epes Sargent's *Proof Palpable of Immortality*, makes a comparison between them: "One might mistake her [Katie], seen from a distance, for Miss Cook; but the apparition was large, with slender waist, while Miss Cook, though pretty, is much smaller, and her hands are not as large as Katie's. There could be no mistake: they were two distinct personalities" (Sargent 59). While the passage's purpose is ostensibly to prove that Katie and Cook are different beings, it nonetheless cements the notion that these women might be mistaken for one another by the casual viewer, thus suggesting that they are two sides of the same coin.

Read in the context of other Spiritualist writings about the relationship between medium and spirit, the interconnectedness of Cook and Katie becomes even deeper. Frank Podmore recounts discussions in *The Spiritualist* in 1876-1877 about what precisely a materialized spirit was made of. The writers conceded "that the evidence for the actual presentation of a material form distinct from that of the medium left much to be desired. It was indeed suggested that such a form probably existed merely as a temporary emanation from the body of the medium, deriving its material elements wholly from that body; thus medium and spirit form were alike for the time materialised entities in a condition of unstable equilibrium, and reciprocally dependent" (Podmore 108). Thus, the spirit form is really the body of the medium, transformed into "the likeness of another

body" while the medium is "entranced and controlled by his spirit guides" (Podmore 108). Katie King confirms this in her previous discussion described by J.M. Gully when she writes of taking "vitality" from the medium (Sargent 62). Similarly, in a séance described in the January 1897 issue of *Borderland*, Elizabeth D'Espérance recounts feeling "strangely weak and powerless" as "a sort of far-away-from-everybody sensation frightened me very much," before looking down to realize that her legs had vanished because they were then constituting the form taken by the materialized spirit on the other side of the curtain (56). The matter of the medium's body—and according to some, a less material part of the medium as well—is being extruded by the spirit; the medium's body does not, however, either disintegrate or become totally inextricable from the spirit. So instead, as the medium swoons or sleeps, something of her—not an agential, conscious, individualized self, but nonetheless something essential—is still present and active in the room. And the spirit has a good deal of power and authority in this situation. Crookes cites a verse an observer wrote after meeting Katie: "Her overpowering presence makes you feel / It would not be idolatry to kneel" (13). All these depictions of the intermingling, yet not totally unified, spirit and medium complicate the image of the senseless medium made entirely powerless during the séance. She cannot be said to have control over her mind and body, yet she is not entirely absent or objectified.

It is important to reiterate the complexity of this situation: it does not simply become subversive or "good" because the medium is represented as gaining some sort of spiritual power and/or erotic pleasure via her relationship with the spirits. The submission to a spirit is described in Spiritualist texts as bringing genuine risk, pain, and fear.

D'Espérance writes of a particularly terrifying moment of spirit-medium confusion, in which she is materializing a spirit named Anna who all of a sudden seems indistinguishable from D'Espérance herself:

> It must be my own heart I feel beating so distinctly. Yet those arms round me? Surely never did I feel a touch so plainly. I begin to wonder which is I. Am I the white figure or am I the one on the chair? Are they my hands round the old lady's neck, or are these mine that are lying on the knees of me, or on the knees of the figure if it be not I, on the chair?
>
> Certainly they are my lips that are being kissed. It is my face that is wet with the tears which these good women are shedding so plentifully. Yet how can it be? It is a horrible feeling, thus losing hold of one's identity. I long to put out one of these hands that are lying so helplessly, and touch some one just to know if I am myself or only a dream—if 'Anna' be I, and I am lost as it were, in her identity. (346)

The horror of this feeling is attached to its erotics: the confusion of who, among all the women (medium, spirit, séance attendees), is clasping whose neck, who is touching whose knees, who is crying on whose face, who is kissing whose lips? The confusion has gone too far to be comfortable, yet at the same time is the reason D'Espérance is able to facilitate the sentimental reunion of Anna with her loved ones, something she does value. This temporary loss of self is unpleasant, frightening, erotic, and valuable all at once.

But D'Espérance sometimes finds more direct pleasure in spirit contact. During her first attempt at materialization, she becomes conscious of a presence in her enclosed cabinet, and she "felt glued to my chair, dreading that the 'something' would touch me, and having the conviction that if it did I should scream. I turned hot and cold by turns […] there was in some way an indescribable sensation of isolation and loneliness which seemed to place me at an immeasurable distance from others" (226). And then the thing does touch her, and she reports that, strangely, it "had the effect of soothing my fear and excitement. I remembered how one stormy night long ago when watching in an agony of fear beside my sleeping brothers and sister, a hand was placed on my arm; now as then the pressure of the unseen fingers acted like magic and I was no longer afraid" (227). The physical touch between her and the spirit she is contacting soothes her, removing her feeling of "isolation and loneliness" from living beings through contact with the dead.

The personal relationship between medium and spirit adds another dimension to the dynamics of the séance room. While Florence Cook and Katie King are not always represented as being close, Crookes describes Katie's last materialization as a wrenching one for Cook. After giving Crookes instructions for Cook's care—continuing her stewardship of Cook—she

> walked across the room to where Miss Cook was lying senseless on the floor. Stooping over her, Katie touched her and said: 'Wake up, Florie, wake up. I must leave you now.' Miss Cook then awoke, and tearfully entreated Katie to stay a little time longer. 'My dear, I can't; my work is done. God bless you,' Katie replied, and then continued speaking to Miss

> Cook. For several minutes the two were conversing with each other until at last Miss Cook's tears prevented her speaking. Following Katie's instructions, I then came forward to support Miss Cook, who was falling on to the floor, sobbing hysterically. I looked around, but the white robed Katie was gone. (14)

Katie's pet name for Cook, her touch on Cook's shoulder, Cook's tears that prevent her from speaking—the emotional and erotic connection between these two women, facilitated by the swooning and passivity of Cook and the ethereal yet firm presence of Katie, speaks to mediums' active participation and emotional investment in the intense bodily practices of the séance. What we can take from this is not a simple reversal—that mediums did in fact have power in the séance room—but instead a complication of the assertion that the most intense instances of submission within the séance room, when mediums were restrained, surveilled, locked up, and sent into swoons, were straightforward instances of patriarchal control and the worst kind of feminized passivity. When mediums were women, particularly young women, they were often put in positions that compromised their ability to control what was done to their bodies. However, textual representations of Spiritualist practices worked to suggest that these mediums did in fact have some capacity to make choices even in these moments, and that they may have found the passivity, pain, and vulnerability worthwhile, whether because it offered them authority, notoriety, status, the intimate companionship of a spirit, or a temporary escape from the constant struggle to maintain the sort of agential selfhood that was never quite in reach. The concept of consent, as we understand it today, is not

sufficient to navigate the complexities of the medium's submission to her calling and to the spirits. The impossibility of accessing mediumship while maintaining total agency over one's mind and body renders individual consent an inadequate tool for navigating the practice.

There is, however, a basic system of consent that mediums relied on during séances—not individual consent, which their swoons and trances and channeling of spirits prevented—but consent as a social strategy, in which séance participants agreed to adhere to certain conventions about when they were allowed to touch the spirits. Because of the aforementioned imbrication of spirit with medium, many Spiritualists wrote of the danger posed to mediums if spirits were to be manhandled without warning. To protect mediums, sitters asked the spirits permission before touching them. Above, I quoted a passage from Crookes' memoir in which he describes clasping Kate in his arms after asking permission, which was "graciously given" (Crookes 8). I also quoted a passage in which Katie asked a sitter if he "squeezed" before she "permitted" his "manipulations" (Podmore 98). Podmore quotes an account in *Medium in Daybreak* of a séance with the sixteen-year-old medium Rosina Mary Showers in which a sitter, Dr. Richardson, was denied permission to examine a materialized spirit. He writes, "I should have liked to have examined her anatomically, but was met with a cold refusal even when I asked her to put out her tongue and to let me feel her pulse" (102). Apparently, spirits could not only give consent but withhold it.

Perhaps the most notorious danger for mediums was spirit-grabbing: when a skeptical participant grabbed hold of a materialized spirit without warning or permission

in order to try and prove it was, in fact, the medium. It exploited the medium's lack of agency and had negative physiological effects. D'Espérance recounts an instance of spirit grabbing in *Shadow Land*. She writes,

> All I knew was a horrible excruciating sensation of being doubled up and squeezed together […] A sense of terror and agonizing pain came over me, as though I were losing hold of life and was falling into some fearful abyss, yet knowing nothing, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, except the echo of a scream which I heard as at a distance. I felt I was sinking down, I knew not where. I tried to save myself, to grasp at something, but missed it; and then came a blank from which I awakened with a shuddering horror and sense of being bruised to death. (298)

When D'Espérance comes back to her senses, she realizes that the spirit she was materializing had been "seized"—"and the man who had seized her declared it was I" (299). This "blank," this "fearful abyss," is the ultimate danger posed by the Spiritualist's failed agency: the slide from partial to total loss of self. Once again, we have a difficult time determining whether to locate the sexual or the erotic in this description, which certainly evokes sexual violation through the man's seizure of the spirit, which has direct physical effects on the medium.

However, because spirit grabbers could violate the convention of asking the spirits for consent to touch them, this system of consent was not always adequate in preventing harm. Podmore writes that although sitters tended to rally behind mediums, spirit grabbing could not always be prevented because "all the precautions devised by the

mediums for their own safety were frequently powerless" in the face of determined skeptics (107). Consent is not, in this case, an inherent capacity of a naturally agential subject; rather, it is a social convention that mitigates risks taken by people who are constitutionally and socially unable to maintain agential subjecthood. It has its limits, and the spirit mediums described in these texts know they cannot fully rely on it for protection. It is a tool mediums used to manage their vulnerability while taking up a position of erotic submission, but it is not an all-purpose or always effective one.

This reading of mediumship in relation to consent offers us a framework within which we might read Will and Hannibal's BDSM relationship in "Blackbird"—one that attends not only to the explicitly sexual acts the men perform, but to the wider context of their intimacy, Will's "empathy disorder," and the violence of the worlds in which they live. Reading consent through a practice like Spiritualism reminds us that the attempt to delineate between sex as consensual acts (e.g. knifeplay or erotic asphyxiation) and violence as nonconsensual acts (e.g. stabbing or strangling) insufficiently addresses the difficulty of pinning down such a delineation. We will consider how Will and Hannibal attempt to manage Will's vulnerability as a medium by erecting a structure of consensual BDSM, but ultimately fail to do so.

"Blackbird"—whose title is Will's safeword—thematizes consent. Through turning to an examination of how the structure of consent shapes Will's navigation of his relationship with Hannibal, we can see what happens when the extremely porous and vulnerable subject explicitly attempts to use the structure of consent to entirely protect themself from harm. Scholars like Kristina Busse and Malin Isaakson have argued that

fanfiction involving consensual painful sex often advocates for what is known in BDSM circles as an "ethics of care," one that emphasizes communication and caretaking (Isaakson 108, Busse 206). Emungere is invested in an ethics of care, but her fic offers a less optimistic take on the capacity of consent to prevent harm and accommodate desire within the "safe, sane, and consensual" model that Margot Weiss describes as modern BDSM's mantra (viii).

As previously discussed, controlling what enters and exits his mind would be difficult for Will in any intimate relationship, given his heightened capacity to absorb the thoughts and feelings of others, but Hannibal's predilection towards violence makes the threat of undermining Will's agency loom extremely large. Hannibal's acts of violence outside of those performed during his sexual relationship with Will increase the difficulty of relegating sex to its own insulated sphere and thereby stabilizing its meaning. Additionally, when Hannibal has sex with Will he is also purposely engaging the aspects of Will's personality—his fear that he is a killer at heart and that he will lose himself in his profiling work—that most accord with Hannibal's own murderous tendencies. So their erotic exchanges, even when they clearly *are sex*, are also potentially other things that are *not sex*: psychological manipulation and "real" violence. At times, too, it becomes clear that Hannibal might damage Will beyond their sexual agreement; he might hurt him in ways that exceed what Will understands as sexual. All these factors complicate and undermine Will's attempt at consensual submission to Hannibal.

"Blackbird" demonstrates how Will and Hannibal use the formalized system of consensual BDSM to try and prevent the sexualized pain they inflict on each other from

shifting into the terrain of "actual" violence. Brandy L. Simula's 2017 study of how BDSM practitioners understand sexual experiences relates that for many, "the ability to transform experiences and sensations not normatively associated with sexual arousal and/or gratification (e.g., whipping, kicking) into sexual experiences" is a strong part of the appeal of BDSM (Simula 10). Joseph Fischel observes that this is supposedly done through consent: "as consent transforms what would be rape into 'sex,' […] so consent transforms sex with violence, scenes of hierarchy, role-playing, or other forms of explicit power exchange into kink" (33).

Emungere shows how the system of consensual BDSM attempts to pin down the "meaning" of Will and Hannibal's acts as *either* sexual *or* violent. Will believes, for much of the fic, that because the violence they do to each other's bodies happens within their sexual relationship, which is governed by the use of a safeword and frequent check-ins about what both of them want, that this violence is not "really" violence—that is, he distinguishes it from the violence he witnesses as an FBI profiler. It counts as sex because it involves arousal and is consensual, as he unequivocally informs the concerned doctor who treats his encephalitis when she sees the marks that Hannibal has made on his skin. True, it limits the fulfillment of their intense and all-consuming desire for each other, but, when it is successful, it prevents them from permanently harming each other. For example, Will says, "I want to see you…Every part of you…You don't understand…I want to see your bones" (ch. 9). This quite literal desire is allowed a partial outlet when he uses a scalpel to trace thin, precise cuts along Hannibal's ribs and cheekbones during an explicitly sexual encounter (ch. 9). Similarly, Hannibal says that at one point, "I

wished I could take the top off of your skull and dip my hand inside. Touch. The other senses seemed inadequate, and I wanted the full experience" (ch. 7). While in the television show, Hannibal does try to literally open up Will's head with a chainsaw so he can eat his brain ("Dolce"), in "Blackbird," Hannibal instead bites him during sex, leaving marks that *represent* that desire, marks that Will says make him feel "like you've still got your teeth in me. Like you'll never let me go" (ch. 11). Emungere shows that BDSM and consent allow the men to partially enact destructive desires through precise bodily practices that, as Will's friend Alana puts it, signify not actual violence but "the consensual infliction of pain within a sexual context" (Epilogue). In these moments, Emungere represents consent as helpful, if somewhat overreaching in that it is unable to accommodate all desire.

This model of consensual BDSM accords with Robin Bauer's argument that queer BDSM usefully rejects the lie that sexual interaction should occur only "between egalitarian partners whose intimate bodily interactions are devoid of power dynamics and anything that may be thought of as unpleasant emotions or sensations, such as pain, humiliation, shame or discomfort" (3). What Bauer describes as the "ideal of harmonic sex" is "closely related to the liberal construction of the sexual as a subset of the construction of the private sphere […] as a space remote from socio-political life" (3). This attitude denies the realities of power differentials within daily life and the political valence of sexuality. Instead, Bauer argues that

> "Dyke + queer BDSM might, therefore, be understood as creating *alternative intimacies* and, more specifically, *exuberant intimacies,* intimacies that reject

> reason, moderation, mediocrity, harmony and equalities as well as reproduction and usefulness. Instead, alternative intimacies celebrate difference, tension, intensity, risk, excess, ecstasy, wastefulness, perversity, campy extravagance, fluidity and insanity, as well as becoming something beyond the human. Yet, since all this occurs in a space that is partially contained through the negotiating of consent, exuberant intimacies present an alternative sexual ethics rather than transgressiveness per se." (4)

The term "alternative sexual ethics" is of course central to my own project here. However, I am less optimistic than Bauer about the ability of consent to adequately regulate such a sexual ethics in order to prevent harm and accommodate desire, even within a sexual practice that addresses power, risk, vulnerability, and pain. Joseph Fischel argues that some celebrate BDSM for its "moral primacy" of consent: for them, "consent not only exonerates but also extols BDSM sex" (31). However, his analysis of the 2001 German cannibal murder case, in which one participant consented to another killing and then eating him, reveals the inadequacy of consent as an ethical, rather than definitional, core of BDSM (Fischel 34). Consent, he argues, should not transform murder into something legally or ethically acceptable. It is not that Fischel has a problem with kinky, painful, or sadomasochistic sex; he is in fact careful to account for those in his proposals for legal reform. Rather, he is arguing against seeing consent as absolutely transformative, rending any possible action ethically sound as long as it was consented to.

"Blackbird," particularly as seen through the lens of mediumship, demonstrates why Fischel is right to question consent's transformative capacity, though less because

certain actions are unjustifiable even when consented to and more because consensual BDSM is simply not capable of enacting that kind of transformation. The successes of Will and Hannibal's BDSM relationship in allowing the men to express their desire for each other while preventing sex from transforming into violence are exceptions. In fact, BDSM's attempt to distinguish completely between sex and violence fails consistently in "Blackbird." Even when Hannibal scrupulously adheres to BDSM protocol during their sexual encounters, readers know—because we have seen the show, and because most of us already know Hannibal Lecter as a serial killer and cannibal—that Hannibal engages in definitively non-consensual violence outside of his relationship with Will. Will does not know this for most of the fic, and is therefore unable to take it into consideration when giving what he thinks is fully informed consent to Hannibal. However much consent structures their sexual interactions, it is always compromised by what happens "outside" of those interactions.

Feminists have long questioned the capacity of consent to adequately address broader issues not limited to the moment of sexual intercourse itself, particularly underlying social and cultural inequality. As the frequency of Catharine MacKinnon's appearances in a recent issue of *differences* entitled "Sexual Politics, Sexual Panics" attests, contemporary scholars are currently grappling with one of the main issues of the so-called "feminist sex wars" of the 80s and 90s: the pressures placed on consent by social inequality (see Fischel 2019, Chu 2019, Vasa 2019). Fischel, in *Screw Consent*, argues that though he disagrees with MacKinnon's eventual proposal for getting rid of the standard of consent in rape law, her basic theoretical point is solid: that "only in the

fantasy world of liberal legal equality is the line between rape and sex so cut-and-dried a line clearly demarcated by the presence or absence of consent" (Fischel 14). Because of foundational problems like sex inequality, we should be warier of assigning consent the kind of "transformative power" that renders consensual sex the gold standard (Fischel 14). This remains true in BDSM, despite its particular emphasis on consent; Margot Weiss, in her study of contemporary U.S. BDSM communities, reminds us that sadomasochism is not separate from social relations—it is implicated in race, class, and gender politics. Believing that the framework of BDSM, just because it is consensual, is separate from such things would be to "accept a logic that cordons sexuality off from the social real, variously imagined as capitalism, social norms, or the regulatory ideals that produce intelligible subjectivity" (Weiss 6).

When it comes to Hannibal, consent's inadequacy as a way to manage the characters' intimacy is a little more localized. While social inequality does play into their relationship dynamic—Hannibal's wealth and class status are much higher than Will's, and Will's neuroatypicality adds to the power imbalance between them—it is not the main problem, as both are white men. Instead, Hannibal's secret criminal activities, in conjunction with his quasi-professional therapeutic relationship with Will, comprise the supposedly external issues that cannot in fact be separated from their sexual relationship. The specificity of "Blackbird's" critique of consent can (and probably should) be read in two ways at once: it both elides the significance of gender and racial difference in discussions of consent, and it allows readers to sidestep those issues temporarily in order to discuss more personal and particular problems with consent.

To some extent, the problem in "Blackbird" more in accordance with another of Fischel's critiques of consent: that it is difficult to determine "what kind of background information, if undisclosed, embellished, misrepresents, or falsifies vitiates sexual consent, thereby converting sex into actionable sexual misconduct or assault" (96).[22] But I would argue that emungere calls into question the very existence of "background" information: can that really describe (not legally, but ethically and emotionally) what Hannibal does? "Blackbird" asks how to consider the impact of intimate bodily practices someone might perform "outside" of their consensual sexual relationship on that relationship. It suggests that the difficulty of pinning down what "counts" as sex throws a significant wrench in determining what consent is able to manage.

The nature of Hannibal's violence is particularly compromising when it comes to matters of intimacy and erotics because it is a particularly intimate form of violence. Because that violence often parallels what he does to Will in a sexual context, it undermines the ability to delineate between what happens "within" their sexual

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[22] Fischel's solution is a legal one: that "if sex is agreed to under an explicit condition and then that condition is then willfully violated it should be a legal wrong, although not a crime," with the caveat that "some explicit conditionals are unanswerable by law, or at least should be, if we care at all about social constructions, historical contingencies, and cultural differences," meaning that questions like "are you a man?" or "are you black" cannot be answered wrongly or deceptively (Fischel 96-97). Fischel makes this caveat to protect against transphobic accusations that not knowing a person was trans constitutes a violation of consent. Because my concern here is not a legal one, Fischel's solution is not particularly relevant; sure, Will doesn't explicitly state that he'll only have sex with Hannibal if Hannibal isn't a murderer/cannibal, so the sex, under Fischel's rubric, wouldn't be considered legally nonconsensual. (Not that this would likely be very helpful to Hannibal's defense when on trial for murder.) But this doesn't exactly address the issue of how Hannibal's scrupulous adherence to consent within an explicitly sexual context is impacted by his absolutely nonconsensual violence against others—how Will is supposed to feel about or process that situation.

relationship and what happens "outside" of it. In neither *Hannibal* nor "Blackbird" is there a component of Hannibal's murders that we are intended to understand as explicitly sexual—that is, they do not involve sexual intercourse and are not portrayed as sexually motivated. But he does turn the bodies into strange, elaborate sculptures, cutting into them with, presumably, the same kind of tool—if not the same scalpel itself—that he later cuts Will with in "Blackbird" in a sexual context. He describes Will's body as a "canvas" and himself as a "painter" when he whips Will, aestheticizing Will's broken skin like he aestheticizes the bodies of his victims (ch. 6). Although the former turns him on and the latter doesn't, Hannibal certainly engages intimately with all these bodies. And the intimacy of elaborately cooking and eating someone is undeniably an intense bodily practice, one he engages Will in non-consensually when he feeds him human flesh while leading him to believe it is animal. These links between Hannibal's violence outside of his sexual relationship with Will and the acts he performs with Will in the context of that relationship compromise the capacity of consent to adequately moderate the intimacy between Will and Hannibal. "Blackbird" thereby urges readers to ask difficult questions about Will's relationship with Hannibal, and thus about consent in general: can the choking, cutting, whipping, binding, and biting that happens so scrupulously within the bounds of a "safe, sane, and consensual" BDSM arrangement still be consensual given what else Hannibal is doing and keeping from Will? Does it still signify "sex" rather than "violence"?

Emungere's writing surfaces the question of meaning in every sexual encounter between the two men, calling readers' attention to the overlapping of sex and violence

throughout by demonstrating the instability of what any given act "means." Take, for example, the scene in chapter two in which Hannibal comes to Will's classroom after he is finished teaching. He grips Will's tie, and—with "plenty of time for Will to object"—tugs him in to hold him against his body and manipulate Will's movements (ch. 2). Will feels "paralyzed, helpless"; he asks Hannibal, who has still not kissed him, if he is "Enjoying torturing me?" (ch. 2). Will as a helpless, paralyzed victim of Hannibal's torture is something readers familiar with the show will recognize: season one of *Hannibal* presents Will much more literally in this way, unable to stop Hannibal from inducing seizures, manipulating his sense of reality, and shoving a tube down Will's throat to get a human ear into his stomach. And readers know that Hannibal does, in fact, have literal victims, even if the Will of "Blackbird" is not as clearly one of them as he is in canon. This calls readers' attention to the connection between Hannibal's violent crimes and his intimacy with Will. The fact that he offers Will a chance to object to his intimacy in that moment does not negate the parallel between that moment and those of nonconsensual violence.

The reminder of Hannibal's violent actions intensifies when emungere explains why Will enjoys submitting to Hannibal during sex: "He wanted to see what would happen more than he wanted to get off" (ch. 2). In season 1, episode 12, Hannibal explains that he previously warned a serial killer of the FBI's approach—resulting in two deaths, one near-death, and Will having to shoot the killer—because he "was curious what would happen" ("Relevés"). By translating a sentiment from that show that is about murderous violence into one which, in "Blackbird," is about sex, emungere makes

readers link the two. This reminder of what Hannibal is really doing causes readers to question the purely sexual interpretation of his interaction with Will.

In chapter 4, when Hannibal has tied Will's wrists, pinned him to his lap, scratched him with his nails, and ordered him to touch himself, Will, aroused and embarrassed, asks if Hannibal is really just going to watch him. Hannibal says, "I am. You're very attractive like this. Uncertain, even a little scared, almost desperate. Not sure if you can stand to have me watch you while you lose what little control you have left. I think you can, though. I think once you touch yourself, you won't be able to stop. Go on" (ch. 4). Readers familiar with the show will recognize this sentiment as well: it is how canon's Hannibal feels about Will Graham's potential to be a killer. Hannibal wants Will to embrace the violence and darkness Will is afraid he has inside him, which Hannibal believes will effect Will's transformation, what he and other killers refer to as his "becoming" ("Coquilles"). Will in the show is desperate to control himself, fearing that if he is to perform violence on someone, he won't be able to stop. In "Blackbird," this fear is transferred in part to his sexual experiences. In chapter 9, Will's fear of losing control surfaces again when Hannibal invites him to cut him with a kitchen knife. "Will *itched* for the knife," emungere writes, and when he takes it, he thinks "He could be anyone. Garret Jacob Hobbs [a serial killer from the show and fic] with a knife in his hand, slashing his daughter's throat" (ch. 9). This frightens him, and he says he can't believe he's cutting into Hannibal's skin. And Hannibal says: "I can. You are capable of so much more" (ch. 9). Again, emungere uses the way that readers' knowledge of Hannibal from canon makes them connect sexual moments with violent ones even when Will doesn't,

thus drawing attention to the difficulty of reading events in "Blackbird" as unambiguously either one or the other.

"Blackbird" does not suggest that epistemological illumination will solve this problem, however; Will does not simply revise the memories of his encounters with Hannibal into instances of pure violence once he discovers that Hannibal is a serial killer and cannibal. Instead, he is torn between "Hannibal's symphony of horrors" and his "constant care and caution" with Will; he can discount neither Hannibal's violence nor his care (ch. 10). He hopes Hannibal will stop killing but is unsure if his (Will's) desire is enough to make him stop; he does not, however, force the question at first, choosing instead to linger in the space where sex and violence overlap.

Chapter 11 of "Blackbird" explores this space thoroughly, setting up a scenario in which Hannibal knows that Will has discovered his secret, and Will knows that he knows, but neither of them have spoken openly about it yet. In this chapter, Hannibal invites him for dinner and Will accepts, then suggests they finally engage in a sexual act they have been considering for some time: Hannibly tying Will to his kitchen table and cutting into him with a scalpel. This is a key scene in understanding how "Blackbird" theorizes the relation of submission to consent.

The parallel between the BDSM scenes the men have been enacting and Hannibal's violent murders, dissections, and cannibalism is very clear in this situation, and both men know it. Will on Hannibal's table takes the place of his sumptuously prepared murder victims-turned-meat. Will wonders, in fact, if "Hannibal might be planning a meal around the contents of his abdominal cavity" (ch. 11). When Will allows

Hannibal to tie him to the table, he and the readers are aware that it is impossible to distinguish, now, between sex and violence: Hannibal may be planning to kill Will, but even if he is not, any lingering possibility of his cuts in Will's skin being read solely as sexual has fled. Hannibal asks Will to pull on the rope, and he cannot get free; "You've got me," he says, and both characters and readers know this is literally true (ch. 11).

> "Are you afraid, Will?" Hannibal asked. His voice was very soft. Shadows pooled in the hollows of his eyes.
>
> "Yes," Will whispered. "Yes. I'm afraid."
>
> "But you know I'll stop if you need me to, don't you? What's your safeword?"
>
> Will swallowed. "Blackbird. Will you stop, really?"
>
> "Of course. I gave you my word."
>
> Was that a promise? A larger commitment? No way to tell. (ch. 11)

Hannibal promises he will stop if Will says his safeword. But this system of consensual BDSM has been compromised by the blurring of sex and violence and it can no longer keep in place the meanings and safeguards it is meant to ensure. The safeword is no longer a guarantee—and it is clear now that it never really was.

When Hannibal slices into Will's skin, he cuts Will in the same places he cut into the murder victims from earlier in "Blackbird." He mirrors on Will the violence he performed on others: a line up his stomach "just like the cut he'd used to open up Cecelia Mallory," and "precise, parallel lines along Will's bicep, the sort that might hold book pages if they went deep into the muscle," just like cuts he earlier made in a victim's arm

before sliding book pages into them (ch. 11). And then he bites Will, hard enough to break the skin: a bite that, of course, parallels his practice of eating his victims.

Hannibal's bites, which Will has particularly enjoyed throughout "Blackbird," have always drawn the reader's mind to Hannibal's cannibalism. Now that Will is aware of the situation and there is an immediate possibility that Hannibal will in fact kill and eat him, Will also connects the love bites to cannibalism: "The one on his chest felt so deep that it might as well have taken out a chunk of his heart. He let that image roll around in his mind for a while. Beating muscle, red teeth, the viscous drip of blood from Hannibal's lips. Did he always cook them first?" (ch. 12).

The attempt to separate *what means sex* and *what means violence* has clearly failed. Both sex and violence are present here, and the situation has exceeded the capacity of BDSM to manage it adequately. Certainly this is not "safe and sane." But, emungere prompts us to ask, is it—can it be—consensual? To what extent are Will's choices his own, and to what extent is he able to decide which risks are worth taking?

Emungere does not shy away from the power imbalance, the psychological manipulation, and the physical danger here; she does not suggest that Will is entirely uncoerced or that their sexual relationship is equitable. Yet she also does not present a Will who is completely passive or infantilized, who is entirely unable to make decisions for himself because of what has been done to him. Instead, she presents a Will who knows that his vulnerability will always interfere with his capacity to have an entirely equal relationship, and who tries to find the path that will make life somewhat bearable moving forward—not unlike spirit mediums who believe themselves called to a practice

that will bring them suffering and yet is worthwhile. In short, emungere presents a situation in which someone voluntarily gives up their ability to consent to what is done to them after being intensely manipulated by that other person; clearly this is not consensual according to generally accepted definitions. Yet emungere asks us to take seriously the problem with which Will is presented: whatever has brought him to this point, and however dangerous it is, he wants things that are bad for him, and he needs desperately to believe that he has enough agency left to choose them of his own accord.

Will says yes to Hannibal's suggestion of using a scalpel on him even though he knows that Hannibal might break their arrangement and permanently damage him or even kill him. He cedes his ability to fight back and to escape. While they have previously only played at Will submitting fully to Hannibal during sex—at least to Will's knowledge, and, to all appearances, according to Hannibal's intentions—Will now does so truly and entirely. Hannibal emphasizes this by comparing their knifeplay to the time when, as a police officer years before, Will was stabbed in the shoulder. He asks if Will liked it.

> "I liked lying there," Will said. He felt Hannibal was reaching inside him to pull the words out. "I liked that there was nothing I could do."
>
> "You can only allow yourself to give in, to give up, when you have no choice. You'll fight to the bitter end. You can't help yourself."
>
> "Yes." (ch. 11)

In order for Will to stop fighting, he must truly have no choice in the matter. In the case of the stabbing, of course, he really did have no choice. He says he neither

wanted to die nor wanted to not die; he felt, as Hannibal puts it, "released from all responsibility" (ch. 11). But in this instance, Will has chosen to give up agency; he does not tell the police, he accepts Hannibal's dinner invitation, and he allows Hannibal to tie him to the table and use a scalpel on him. In his assessment, then, the possibility of feeling relief from his crushingly difficult attempts to maintain his sense of self, along with the possibility of maintaining his intimacy with Hannibal, who gives him that relief, is more important than his ability to make choices about what happens to his body.

Emungere shows readers Will's relief at giving up agency:

> Hannibal bent to kiss him, slow, open-mouthed, wet and filthy until Will was almost humming with pleasure. When he felt the scalpel press behind his ear, he nearly bit down on his own tongue. It hovered there a moment and then slid down to his neck, a cool, smooth threat.
>
> "Nothing you can do," Hannibal murmured. His lips brushed Will's. Their breath mixed on Will's skin, hot and humid. "The loss of blood is more rapid from the carotid than from the jugular. Either way, it's quick, of course." […]
>
> "It's okay," Will told him, and he meant it. Whatever Hannibal decided to do would be fine. Will felt the threat of the blade against his throat and smiled. (ch. 11)

Will's response is not healthy. It is not free of coercion, manipulation, or uneven power dynamics. But given that Will is already in this situation—and given that the concept of entirely "healthy," power-free sex is a fantasy in the first place, though this particular

instance is exaggeratedly distant from that fantasy—we must ask ourselves what exactly he is supposed to do: how he is supposed to address his needs, desires, and fears now.

Although the scenario in "Blackbird" has clearly strained the concepts of agency and consent to their breaking point, they are still the tools Will has to navigate the situation. They are inadequate, but he does not entirely abandon them. Specifically, Will's safeword is central to how he experiences the scene with the scalpel, and, as the title suggests, to the fic as a whole. I have noted before that it is used in ways that complicate stable definitions of the sexual—ways that highlight the centrality of language in our understanding of consent. When Will's safeword is evoked during the scalpel scene, its capacity to moderate the situation is up in the air not only because Will knows Hannibal is a killer, but because Will has attempted to use his safeword to stop Hannibal from killing. When Will discovers that Hannibal is a murderer, he gets in touch with a tabloid journalist and has her print a coded one-word message to Hannibal on her website that night: the message, we soon discover, is "blackbird." Will is gambling here on how far beyond the sexual the safeword will stretch. He does not know if it extends to Hannibal's murders, but he is hoping it will.

The use of Will's safeword in this context demonstrates that the difficulty of determining what "counts" as sex is actually at the heart of the concept of consent, rendering what is supposed to be an absolute, stable concept ("no means no, yes means yes") inherently problematic, dependent on meaning and interpretation. By evoking his safeword, Will evokes their whole system of consensual BDSM activity, their sexual relationship. The word has weight because of the symbolic meaning the men have given

it. It carries Hannibal's promise of care and respect for Will's boundaries; it carries Will's unprecedented trust in Hannibal. Hannibal has said, "'Whatever we do, I will always stop if you need me to,'" and Will, early in their relationship, "did know it, *believed* it, trusted Hannibal in ways that he'd never trusted anyone" (ch. 3). But now Will doesn't know if he can use it to get Hannibal to stop intimate bodily practices that cause great pain to Will; even though those practices happen with bodies besides Will's, he feels their effects keenly in his own mind and body.

Will is hyperaware of the importance of interpretation in their situation. As he waits for Hannibal's response to his use of his safeword, he fixates on the slippage between the sexual and the violent, the figurative and the literal, that has been central to their relationship all along. During the scene with the scalpel, the question of the safeword's purview goes unanswered; Hannibal does not kill Will, but they also do not discuss whether he will stop killing entirely. This discussion occurs soon after, when Will walks in on Hannibal in the middle of a murder scene, standing over the body of an unconscious man he is about to kill. Will says: "I asked you to stop […] I know you got my message." Hannibal replies, "I got it, yes. I considered it. This is outside the boundaries of our agreement." And Will answers, "It's supposed to stop you from hurting me. You're hurting me" (ch. 12).

The men cannot agree on the meaning of their safeword because they cannot agree on how far its purview extends. And they cannot agree on how far its purview extends in large part because it has never been altogether clear whether the safeword only applies to their sexual relationship. Nor has it ever been clear what exactly counts as part

of their sexual relationship. Will's answer—it's supposed to stop you from hurting me—appears straightforward, but surely is not; a safeword is not intended to, nor is it capable of, preventing all emotional harm that may come from an intimate relationship: disappointment, disagreement, betrayal, heartbreak. On the other hand, though, Hannibal is hurting Will in a very specific way that clearly resembles and relates to the sexualized pain he inflicts on Will. The knife that he holds out to Will in this moment, asking him to cut into the unconscious man, evokes the scalpel that Hannibal used to cut Will in an explicitly sexual context. As in the context of spirit grabbing, consent cannot fully manage the situation, because it relies on a social and/or personal agreement about the meaning of a given act, an agreement that is never fully reached.

3. Navigating the Nontransparency of Sex and Desire

So far we have considered the problem of what "counts" as sex in "Blackbird." As difficult as that is to do, the fic at least offers us explicit sex scenes in which to ground this debate. When it comes to Spiritualist texts, the question of what "counts" as what—what counts as sexual, erotic, intimate, or none of those things—is particularly difficult. Yet it is a question we ought to address directly, given that we are using Spiritualist mediumship to consider issues of agency, consent, and submission in more obviously sexual contexts, and that contemporary scholars often speak of Spiritualism as sexual or at least erotic. Eve Sedgwick notes in *Between Men* that what it means for something to be "sexual," especially in relation to power, is not consistent or ahistorical (6). Nonetheless, it may seem a pedantic academic exercise to quibble about whether sex is happening in Victorian accounts of séances (obviously it is not) or in the BDSM

Hannibal fic labeled on Archive of Our Own as "Explicit" (obviously it is). And I would not claim that there is somehow hidden genital intercourse in depictions of séances or that the genital intercourse in "Blackbird" is "not sex." It gets trickier, though, when we are trying to determine what relationship Spiritualist practices had to sex, or to "the sexual," or to "erotics," and which terms mean what. As we have seen with "Blackbird," this confusion makes it difficult to negotiate consent and to articulate the complex workings of erotic submission.

Scholars invested in gender are particularly attentive to the relationship of Spiritualism to sex (or the sexual, or erotics—the difficultly of sorting out which is which and what each term means is of course part of the problem). Generally, they agree that there was something erotic, or maybe sexual, about the séance. Alex Owen sees the sexuality of the séance as buried, claiming that "the subterranean theme of sexuality which ran through much of spiritualist practice went largely unrecognised and unexamined by the majority of the faithful" (Owen 220). Marlene Tromp, however, believes that the erotic events of the séance room, in which participants "broke countless rules of decency and decorum" and engaged in "sexual pandemonium," had a significant influence on gender relations outside Spiritualist rooms and circles (21). Molly McGarry also argues for the wider influence of the "multiple boundary crossings" of the séance, in which "both propriety and traditional gender dichotomies dissolved in the dark as spirits bestowed their touch on willing men and women alike" (104). Even Owen contests that although Spiritualists themselves may not have been aware of the sexuality of their practices—despite the fact that "the very vocabulary of trance mediumship oozed

sexuality"—the séance did help redefine the limits of feminine intimacy and pleasure (218). Like a "theatrical or fantasied scene," the materialization séance "established the conventions which made possible the staging of desire" (Owen 222).

Pamela Thurschwell's work on slightly later occult practices like telepathy offers a nuanced, useful reading of the relationship between sex and the occult. She writes, "At the turn of the century, theories of occult and technological transmission subtend the psychic and social construction of transgressive sexual desires and encounters. As the history behind psychoanalysis's fraught relationship to occultism reveals, fantasies of occult transmission cannot be reduced to the repressed secrets of sex. Rather psychoanalysis emerges from the same questions which mobilize psychical researchers" (4). Both psychoanalysis and the occult—which, as Thurschwell points out, were mutually imbricated in complex ways—are concerned with ideas about sexuality as transmission and influence, particularly given the context of advancing communications technologies.

Thurschwell does not examine the séance in depth, but she does approach occult practices as sites of negotiation of sociocultural beliefs, fears, and norms. This accords with the critics of Spiritualism who suggest that the séance offered a sort of fantasy space in which ideas about sexuality and gender could be sort of "tried on" and renegotiated. Marina Warner is the exception—she sees mediumistic practices like ectoplasmic photographs as "foolish, crazy, embarrassing, prurient, repellant," simply reflecting the worst of Victorian and early twentieth-century gender imbalances. While I agree that séances offer a staging ground for issues around gender and sexuality—and would add,

more specifically, that central to those issues is the emergent question of sexual consent—Warner's disgusted language is nonetheless instructive. Along with Owen's "oozed sexuality" and Tromp's "sexual pandemonium" and even McGarry's "spirits could be seductive" (McGarry 104), it reminds us that even as we investigate how nineteenth-century mediumship offers indirect insight into contemporary issues that are explicitly, directly sexual, nineteenth-century mediumship is itself in a complicated relationship with "sex" itself. And because scholarly attitudes toward the sexuality of mediumship reflect the priorities of these scholars in relation to contemporary sexual politics, we ought to spend a little time considering how the complexity of the relationship between the practices of mediumship and sex and/or erotics impacts and reflects how we distinguish what counts as sex.

Scholars of Spiritualism approach the sexuality or erotics of mediumship—much like I am doing—as a way into thinking through contemporary sexual politics. Owen's investment is in critiquing cultural norms around female passivity and hysteria by showing how repressed frustration with such norms led mediums to engage in a complicated, painful, largely subconscious negotiation of power and gender expectations. She wants to show the psychic damage done by such norms. Tromp is deeply invested in women's agency; she identifies boundary blurring and chaos in the séance room as a means of helping women attain a pretty traditional, Western bourgeois kind of personhood—the insular subject who has control over her sexuality and life choices and access to the public sphere. McGarry's aim in regard to the question of sexuality and the séance is to locate nineteenth-century queer ways of being that are not entirely

secularized. Warner, meanwhile, seems to side with those who place alternative bodily and erotic practices squarely against feminist aims; she is disturbed by women who pulled ectoplasm out of their noses and unfavorably compares the anti-fraud practices of containing mediums to erotic bondage scenarios, claiming that they made "disturbingly fetishized and erotic figures" out of the women involved (Warner 295).

Spiritualism provides a particularly fertile ground for working out our own priorities around sex and gender in part because it is such a nebulous subject—we fill the gaps in our knowledge of what was "really happening" in these supposedly supernatural experiences—but also in part because it is so easy to identify it as somehow "about sex." Yet it is difficult for us to think through the medium's own relationship to sex and erotics: it is so obscure, so nontransparent, to us as present-day readers—and probably to nineteenth-century readers—and likely even to the mediums themselves. Desire, intimacy, heightened physical and emotional states: all were present in the séance, but we cannot precisely match up, say, restraining mediums to modern bondage practices, even as we cannot responsibly ignore the parallels. Phrases like "sexual pandemonium" and "oozed sexuality" obscure the ways in which the séance was *not* sex, even as scholars often focus on the sociocultural implications of mediumship rather than the individual experiences of the mediums involved. We need a reading of Spiritualism that more frankly and thoughtfully addresses its relationship to sexual experiences, while also resisting the temptation to simply parallel sexual practices with Spiritualist ones. If I am claiming that erotic submission is a position mediums took up, and that it allowed them to

negotiate their complex relationship to power and agency, we should attend to the difficulty of pinning down "what means sex" within Spiritualist texts.

We can start with the distinction Sharon Marcus makes in *Between Women* between the sexual and the erotic. Eroticism is about a kind of somatic and psychological intensity: "Erotic relationships involve intensified affect and sensual pleasure, dynamics of looking and displaying, domination and submission, restraint and eruption, idolization and humiliation. These erotic dynamics can exist between two people or between a person and an object, image, or text" (114). She marks out the "erotic" as something sometimes overlapping, but not synonymous with, the sexual: "Erotic dynamics can lead to sexual excitement or activity, but even when they do not, they remain qualitatively different from the more neutral responses people have to the majority of people and things in their environment" (114). Marcus' delineation between the two comes in part from her "just reading" methodology—a rejection of a psychoanalytic "symptomatic" reading that its adversaries claim sees sex at the bottom of everything—and in part from the need for a strategy to resolve the longstanding scholarly debate over whether nineteenth-century women had sex with each other and whether that was the key to deciding if they were in fact "lesbians."

When thinking about Spiritualism, it is useful to find alternative models to the psychoanalytic, which tends to read practices like channeling and physical contact with spirits as rooted in repressed sexuality, or, as in Alex Owen's work, a general ambivalence towards the strictures of nineteenth-century femininity (203). It may be possible to adopt Marcus' distinction when discussing the relationships between

mediums, spirits, and sitters: erotic, but not (in the séance room itself, at any rate) sexual. Yet the sexual/erotic split, which works so well in Marcus' research as a localized response to the specific scholarly tangle in the field of c18 and c19 queer female sexualities over sex and taxonomy,[23] does not fully account for representations of Spiritualist practice which seem themselves to take on the language of the sexual, and which engage so deeply with issues around mental and bodily intimacy that are so central to our own discussions, and nineteenth-century discussions as well, about sex and consent. To say that the séance room is often represented as erotic, in Marcus' definition of the word, is true. And yet the language used to describe séance practices sometimes seems to evoke the more directly, explicitly sexual, blurring, perhaps purposely, the line between the erotic and the sexual.

The following passage from William Crookes' *Remarkable Spirit Manifestations* (1874) offers an example of this blurring by adopting the language around courtship and sexuality to describe the following interaction with Florence Cook's frequent spirit visitor, Katie:

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[23] Marcus' sexual/erotic distinction is navigating a particular snare in which scholars of c18 and c19 female sexualities frequently got stuck: the question of whether or not historical subjects "actually had sex," and the extent to which that mattered in designating them "lesbians." By the time Marcus publishes *Between Women* in 2007, this debate has partially been rerouted to the question of whether the "lesbian" even exists conceptually before the late nineteenth century, though this seemingly new debate still hinges on the relationship of "having sex" to "sexual identity." Marcus' insistence that same-sex female eroticism was a widespread, even normative part of mid-nineteenth century life allows for scholars to discuss queer female intimacy without needing to choose between "having sex" and "not having sex" or "lesbian" and "not lesbian." Therefore, her distinction between eroticism and sex, while helpful, should not be taken as a universal one equally applicable to all people, times, and places.

> Feeling, however, that if I had not a spirit I had at all events a lady close to me, I asked her permission to clasp her in my arms, so as to be able to verify the interesting observation which a bold experimentalist has recently somewhat verbosely recorded. Permission was graciously given, and I accordingly did—well, as any gentleman would do under the circumstances. Mr. Volekman will be pleased to know that I can corroborate that the 'ghost' (not struggling, however) was as material a being as Miss Cook herself. (Crookes 8)

That the courteous request for permission to "clasp her in my arms" came solely from a desire to verify a scientific experiment is belied in the syntactically suggestive next sentence: "Permission was graciously given, and I accordingly did—well, as any gentleman would do under the circumstances." The em dash signals both a gentlemanly elision (politely deferring from a description of intimate contact with a lady) and a sly wink hinting at a sort of "gentlemen will be gentlemen" attitude toward the mildly scandalous pleasure of clasping an unmarried and barefooted woman in one's arms. The fact that the ghost did not struggle is presumably a reference to fraudulent mediums who were caught by "spirit grabbers" and attempted to get away before being unmasked, but it also reads easily as an assertion of the consensual nature of the embrace: the lady yielded graciously to his attentions. That parenthetical "(not struggling, however)" ever so slightly raises the specter of rape.

Lest we see this as an anomalous representation, let us consider another sitter's description of a similar interaction with Katie, this time recorded in Frank Podmore's

Modern Spiritualism, vol. 2 (1902). This seance guest wrote, "Kate came again for a little while, and allowed me to go up to the cupboard and touch her face and hand, after first putting to me the pertinent question, 'Do you squeeze?' On assuring her I did not do anything so improper, the manipulations were permitted" (Podmore 98). The young female ghost's prohibition on squeezing can be read simultaneously as a request to be socially proper, be gentle, and respect her boundaries. These latter two readings in particular tie into historian Joanna Bourke's assertion that the later nineteenth century saw increased investment in the ability of men to control their emotions regarding sex in order to accommodate their wives' nervousness and purity (Bourke 427). Forcing their wives to have sex, even though legally they had the right to, was a sign of poor moral character. Of course we are not talking about marital contact in this Spiritualist account, but the exchange does evoke the later nineteenth-century debates about men's sexual behaviors and the extent of women's agency and/or need of protection in such matters.

So "sex," narrowly defined, is not happening in these interactions between sitters and spirits. Yet the language used to describe such encounters points toward a working-out of sexual politics—and instances of erotic exchange—in the séance room and in Spiritualist writings. And the reason that, at least from our vantage point, it is not quite not sex is that it was recorded in such a way that suggests the sexual. Which means that as we plumb these texts for ideas about the emergence of consent, we must take care not to simply locate "sex" or "sexuality" in the séance room, but in the texts themselves. We must also articulate the role language plays in denoting something as *not sex* but also *not not sex.* As the Spiritualist texts navigate issues of consent—and how effective it can be

in the face of mediumistic practices—the question of how much something counts as sexually charged (and thus under the purview of consent) matters quite a lot. Much of the difficulty of answering this question comes from the language of the texts themselves.

This returns us to "Blackbird," and that text's refusal to pin down what "counts" as sex. While emungere stages this debate within the context of explicitly sexual BDSM encounters, she takes her cue from the source text. NBC's *Hannibal* is not all that dissimilar from Spiritualist texts in that locating the erotic or the sexual is difficult to do. The long and short of it is that, in the television show, Hannibal and Will don't kiss or have sex or say "I love you," but fans generally consider their relationship canonically queer. The YouTube series "Are They Gay?," which half-jokingly, half-earnestly analyzes whether characters in shows are in gay relationships, declares emphatically that Hannibal and Will are, without doubt, "gay." (The *Hannibal* video takes a mere seven minutes and thirty seconds to decide this, rather then the usual fifteen or twenty it spends on other potential couples—it's the shortest video in the series after their tongue-in-cheek *Brokeback Mountain* episode.) In a media fandom landscape which, around the time of the show's airing, tended to be deeply suspicious of "queerbaiting," in which queer subtext suggested to viewers that the characters would get together but was never followed through with (see BBC's *Sherlock* and the CW's *Supernatural*), *Hannibal's* queer fans embraced Hannibal and Will's relationship as genuinely queer despite the lack of explicitly sexual contact. It helped that Bryan Fuller, the showrunner, is gay, and unlike many writers on other shows enthusiastically embraced the "ship," even appearing in photos wearing a sweatshirt on which was printed fanart of the characters kissing. It

also helped, perhaps, that the show contained an unequivocally canonical queer relationship between Alana Bloom and Margot Verger, two major supporting characters. But it also seems that the show's own depiction of Will and Hannibal's intimacy goes beyond what viewers considered simply "subtext," and some believe that had *Hannibal* not been cancelled after its third season, the men's relationship might have developed into a more physically romantic or sexual one.

It is certainly hard to deny that Will and Hannibal's relationship becomes increasingly erotic as the show progresses. In the third season, Will muses, "We're conjoined. Curious if either of us can survive separation" ("Dolce"). Various moments in the series emphasize their erotic link: Hannibal caresses Will's face before stabbing him; the camera lovingly displays their lips and throats as they eat ortolan together; they are shown in bed together during a fantasy overlay of them having sex with different women in different places. Hannibal and Will's relationship is clearly affectively intense—Hannibal's therapist confirms that she believes Hannibal is "in love" with Will ("The Number of the Beast is 666), and a tabloid journalist calls them "murder husbands" ("And the Woman Clothed in the Sun")—as well as physically intimate; Hannibal smells Will, tenderly cleans his wounds, and bathes him while preparing to slice open his head so he can consume his brain. And in the final episode, Will helps Hannibal murder a serial killer, embraces him while covered in blood, whispers "It's beautiful," and then throws them both over a cliff ("The Wrath of the Lamb").

My focus is on "Blackbird," so I will not dive any deeper into the complicated, ambiguous queer erotics of the show itself. But it is worth noting that *Hannibal* fanfiction

is built on this foundation: a show in which the main characters' relationship is unquestionably intimate and erotic, but in ways that only flirt with "the sexual." The question of "what is sex?" inheres in the show, in its obsessive investigation of bodily violation, consumption, merging, and transformation. "Blackbird" is building on this aspect of its source when it renders the men's relationship explicitly sexual, yet also questions, as we have observed, the boundaries of what "counts" as sex—and, for that matter, sexual violence—and what falls under the rubric of consent. We have examined how it does so within explicitly sexual encounters, but we should also consider how it broadens the scope of this question to show that sexual politics cannot be confined to instances of sexual intercourse.

As noted before, in both the show and the fic, Will and Hannibal begin with a psychiatric relationship, albeit an unofficial one arranged by Will's boss at the FBI. This sort-of professional relationship, already a mildly undefined one, slides into romantic and sexual territory early in the fic. In chapter one, Hannibal draws Will during their session; Will falls asleep, and Hannibal brings him home for dinner and then invites Will to sleep in his guest room. It is clear to both men that there is some sort of sexual charge between them—"What's this?" Will asks during a moment of prolonged touch, but then admits he can only cope with it being dinner at the moment, so they don't broach the matter again that night (ch. 1). Some flirtatious texting follows, and then Hannibal gives Will a rose, telling him that he wouldn't want Will to "mistake my intentions" (ch. 2). While this does place the men's relationship in unambiguously sexual and romantic territory, sex and romance is not all that structures it moving forward. Will and Hannibal soon decide that

Will is not Hannibal's patient because Hannibal is not being paid to see him, but they also decide that Will is going to attending therapy sessions with Hannibal. Their continuing psychiatric relationship complicates their sexual one, in large part because it is sometimes difficult to tell what counts as "therapy" and what counts as "sex" during their interactions. This is particularly true because the power play aspects of their sexual experiences involve Hannibal prying into Will's emotionally vulnerable places, just as he does in his capacity as Will's therapist.

An early exchange demonstrates the difficulty of determining what counts as sex. When Will is chopping vegetables for dinner, Hannibal steps up behinds him, takes his wrist, and guides the knife Will is using to Hannibal's own throat. Shocked and totally transfixed, Will lets it stay there.

> "How does it feel?" Hannibal said.
>
> "Terrifying," Will managed. He felt like someone had punched the air from his lungs.
>
> "And?"
>
> Will didn't move, even when Hannibal let go of his wrist. He stared and stared and took a half step closer. He knew how much pressure it took to cut with this knife. If he bore down even a little harder, he'd see blood.
>
> Hannibal laid a hand on his hip. "Will?"
>
> "Thrilling," he whispered.
>
> "And if I asked you to cut me?"

> Will jerked his eyes up to Hannibal's face. It was as calm and smooth as a windless sea.
>
> "I would," Will said, heart racing. "I would if you wanted me to."
>
> Hannibal smiled, approving, and stepped casually away to tend his steak. (ch. 2)

It is difficult for the reader to determine how exactly to categorize this moment. It is intimate and erotic, but it also seems that Will experiences it as therapeutic: "I don't even know if that was therapy or—or something else," he says breathlessly when the moment has passed (ch. 2). Even if we as readers dismiss Will's reading of it as therapy (it is hardly orthodox), we have to take seriously the fact that he encounters it partly as a psychologically significant moment that offers insight into his sense of self.

Soon after, emungere constructs a series of encounters that demonstrate how impossible it is, from the very beginning, to clearly delineate the boundaries of the sexual and the erotic within the men's relationship. The day after the knife incident, Hannibal visits Will at his work, where he pulls Will's tie tight and almost, but does not quite, kiss him, and then takes him to lunch—romantic overtures, clearly. But later, Will goes to Hannibal's office for his therapy appointment. There, they enter into the realm of the professional, both professional psychiatry and professional criminology, as they discuss Will's latest case. Hannibal begins to talk about Will's fears that he may be like the killers he catches. He says something particularly painful to Will, who replies, "Don't," and Hannibal stops. He tells Will that all he ever needs to do is tell him to stop, and he will. Then:

Will took a breath and let it out in a rush. “We’re not talking about therapy anymore.”

Hannibal gave him a small half-smile. “Not only therapy, certainly. Would you like to choose a different word? One you won't say by reflex or accident?”

“I don’t think you’re supposed to need a safeword with your psychiatrist.”

“It might have other uses.”

“It might. What exactly do you have in mind, Dr. Lecter?” (ch. 3)

They agree on a safeword—and indeed verbalize their interactions for the first time as “sexual domination”—in response to this moment of therapist-patient interaction (ch. 3). When Hannibal says “Not *only* therapy,” he suggests that the safeword might be used in situations that are not, or do not appear to be, sexual. This begs the question: do the men understand their therapy to be in some way sexual, or do they assume that the structure of consent implied by the safeword applies to other parts of their relationship as well? Even if we take the concept of consent broadly, understanding it as a respect for bodily autonomy in general, using a safeword in the context of therapy clearly stretches even the more capacious usage of sexual consent.

So Will and Hannibal’s relationship, which seems so obviously sexual given that the fic is labeled “explicit” and tagged as “dom/sub,” actually begins in a realm whose parameters are more difficult to define. Their safeword develops in the context of a therapeutic exchange, though a highly eroticized one, as Will is standing between

Hannibal's legs at the time. The incident in which Hannibal has Will bring a knife to Hannibal's throat, which foreshadows the knifeplay they will engage in later in explicitly sexual contexts, is erotically charged, but Will also experiences it in relation to the men's therapeutic relationship.

Will's safeword continues to call attention to the difficulty of pinning down what counts as sex, despite the fact that a safeword would more logically help define something as sexual. The word Will chooses is "blackbird"—a reminder of the birds he saw "safe among the thorns" at the crime scene he is currently working on, and, of course, the fic's title (ch. 3). This latter fact suggests that the issue of consent, and the question of how far it and thus "the sexual" stretch, is at the heart of the fic. It also highlights the importance of language in determining, or failing to determine, what counts as sex.

Will's safeword is used only one time before he employs it to try to stop Hannibal from committing any more crimes. This first use happens in the context of an explicitly sexual encounter, but even then, the safeword's employment fails to fully delineate between what is and is not sex. Will uses it after they seem to have finished having sex, after Hannibal has teased him, hurt him, and told him what to do, and after Will has had an orgasm. Will uses the safeword not to stop their sexual contact but to stop Hannibal from whispering soothing, sweet things:

> Hannibal stood and pulled him close, come and sweat and everything pressed up against his suit as if it didn't matter. As if holding

> Will was more important. Will hid his face against Hannibal's shoulder and held on like he might fall off the face of the Earth if he didn't.
>
> "You did so well," Hannibal told him, and smoothed his hair back from his forehead and kissed his temple. "You were so good for me. Perfect."
>
> Somehow, Will hadn't expected the kindness. It hit him like a bullet, sharp and sudden in his chest and throat. He pushed at Hannibal and stumbled back. The tie came free with a few desperate yanks. He pressed himself against the wall next to the fireplace.
>
> "Will—"
>
> "Blackbird," Will said. His voice was shaking. (emungere ch. 4)

The men discuss the sex that just happened in the past tense—"you did so well," "you were so good"—as if the sex is over. And what Will uses his safeword to stop—Hannibal saying sweet but vague things to him—is not an unequivocally sexual act. But then again, talking about sex while still naked in bed together just after one person has an orgasm is also not unequivocally *not* sex. Hannibal stops immediately, and yet *what* he is being asked to stop is a little hard to say. He stops telling Will he did a good job; he also stops touching and soothing him. He stops the erotic *mood*, adopting "the cool, assessing look he often wore in their sessions"—that is, slipping from a sexual to a therapeutic mode (ch. 4). He offers Will coffee and the men discuss Will's feelings about being praised.

So the first time Will uses his safeword, although it is during the postcoital moment of an unquestionably sexual scene, nonetheless evokes the problematic ambiguity of reading something as sex. Is language sex—Hannibal telling Will he is good? Is language therapy—Hannibal telling Will he is good? The use of the safeword, which ought to designate the moment as unambiguously sexual, in fact calls attention to the difficulty of determining the difference between sex and language, and the way in which consent is at the heart of this difficulty.

Another way in which language is inadequate to the task of negotiating sexual and erotic situations is present in its inability to represent the complexity of desire. It is often difficult to articulate what one wants, even to oneself. When we look at Spiritualist texts, determining what the medium does or does not want is not entirely possible. Whether they take pleasure in their work, whether they experience it as only painful, whether it has an erotic valence for them—whether any or all of those things are true—is something we cannot, however acute our readings of even their own words may be, fully determine. Certainly this is partly due to our historical remove from the context of the writing, and the conventions of gender and morality within which mediums were operating. But "Blackbird" reminds us of another key reason language cannot transparently represent desire: because desire is so often not transparent to the person experiencing it in the first place. And given the current emphasis on "enthusiastic consent," which links desiring sex to saying yes to sex to enjoying sex, an inability to determine what one desires is yet another factor that compromises the ability of consent to navigate sexual experiences. As Fischel points out, enthusiastic consent is not actually necessary for pleasure and also

does not guarantee pleasure: one might consent and have bad sex, or hesitantly consent to things that turn out to be good. He worries that "in the current moment of sexual politics—let's call it the Consent Moment—we risk collapsing consent into desire into pleasure, not (yet) as a matter of law or policy (more on this below) but as a matter of political rhetoric and quite possibly phenomenological experience" (1). Fischel agrees that affirmative consent is the "least-bad standard" in legal matters, but urges against confusing what is legally acceptable with what is desired or what is pleasurable.

This is important to remember when reading "Blackbird," which demonstrates how consenting to something and desiring something do not always align. Hannibal cannot always do exactly what Will wants from him because it is not always clear to either of them exactly what Will wants. Will's desires are often not transparent even to himself; they often conflict with each other, too, so he wants and does not want things at the same time. Consent is not really set up to fix this problem; consent works only in relation to an explicit expression of desire (to stop, to continue), so if a person wants something and still says no, if the other person does it, that's not consensual. Likewise, presumably, if a person doesn't want something and says yes, assuming there was no pressure placed on them, that is consensual. But there are always pressures, always external influences, always power structures that impact sex, no matter who is having it with whom. In Will's case, this is clearly the case. Hannibal has manipulated him and lied to him, taking advantage of the vulnerability his neuroatypicality—his mediumship—engenders. Hannibal is extremely dangerous to Will.

But Will knows this even before he finds out that Hannibal is a killer. He understands how compromised he is by his porosity and vulnerability. But this understanding does not help him figure out what to do about what he experiences as strong desire. It does not help him determine what to do when part of him wants one thing and another part of him doesn't, or when he is simply unsure of what he wants. Complicating this is the fact that the men's sexual dynamic is centered around power play and the pretense that Hannibal is making Will do things that he wants but pretends not to. Hannibal argues that this is because Will's neurodivergence, and the way it affects his life, has previously driven away friends and potential partners: "Your experience suggests that any help offered will be withdrawn and leave you worse off than before. When I tell you to kneel for me, or take the pain I inflict on your body […] I remove your agency. The choice and the fault, if any, are entirely mine" (emungere, ch. 9). Will is aroused by Hannibal's insistence that he do things that make him feel humiliated or hurt—things that part of him does not want to do—because it feels as though Hannibal is removing his agency. The forceful removal of Will's agency is both arousing and a deep relief. So Will consents to things that part of him does not want, because he deems the psychological and physical benefits worth it.

This problem of conflicting or competing desire is consistent from the beginning of "Blackbird." Will is often uncertain of his desires or subject to multiple desires at once. He must therefore make the choice to consent or not without being fully transparent to himself. The first time Hannibal binds his wrists, Will sitting on his lap, is a good example: "Will's heart thudded in his chest, excitement and fear and arousal twisting

together. The bulge of his cock was clearly visible against the front of his pants. It ached, and he wanted to touch, but when he reached down, it was mostly in the hope that Hannibal would stop him" (ch. 4). Will's desire is split: he wants to touch, and he wants Hannibal to stop him from touching. The fact that he wants the latter more makes it easier for Will to choose to let Hannibal call the shots, but it does not negate the former desire. Will's desires are complicated further when Hannibal asks if he wants to try to get away, noting that it won't work: "You are tied and vulnerable. I have every advantage. I am a great deal stronger than you are, and I intend to keep you this way, helpless and spread open for me" (ch. 4). Will's response is instinctive and genuine: "It was the word, helpless, that did it. Will found he couldn't stay still for that, even if he'd wanted to. He'd worked too hard to make himself anything but" (ch. 4). Will does not want to stay still—presumably because attempting to escape is part of the erotic game they are playing—but he also *can't* stay still. He wants to pretend to struggle, but he also finds himself actually struggling. And this situation calls attention to the difficulty of separating the "pretend" struggle from the "actual" struggle. BDSM, with its system of consent and sexual play, is meant to pin down those meanings—to erect a framework around acts that would be violence outside that framework—but as this scene shows, the framework is only strategic, built on a temporary agreement to pretend that meaning can be stabilized by language. It allows participants to decide that something is okay or not, but it does not stop participants from feeling as though they are actually trapped or that they genuinely want to get away. As long as they are capable of indicating they want to stop via the agreed-upon safeword or signal—and as long as the other participant(s) respect that

agreement—participants may consent to things that part of them, or all of them, finds upsetting, un-arousing, emotionally wrenching, or even actively not wanted.

This might be tenable in some circumstances: when viewed in the context of sexual intercourse, erotic submission might be worth the risks. In "Blackbird," this provisional system of meaning-making could, perhaps, have maintained a balance between the two men, even as it continually reveals the contingency and instability of these meanings, within their sexual relationship. But the men exist outside the framework they construct for their intimate relationships; the rest of their lives cannot be so cleanly separated from what happens during sex. Once Will discovers that Hannibal is a killer, their formal sexual arrangement cannot remain unaffected.

After the revelation that Hannibal is a murderer, the parts of emungere's Will that do not want to be intimate with Hannibal anymore are powerful and clearly genuine. After the scene with the scalpel, as Hannibal holds Will, we are presented with his strongly conflicting desires: "Will wanted to hate it, but the truth was that he had never felt safer or more cared for in his life. He closed his eyes and let Hannibal hold him and stroke down his back." One the one hand, Will truly desires a different reaction: he wants to hate how Hannibal makes him feel. At the same time, he desires intimacy with and care from Hannibal. Will must make a choice based on those conflicting desires. He cannot choose both. Consenting to let Hannibal care for him sexually and emotionally will inevitably mean going against the part of Will that wants to feel differently about him. Consent cannot fully align with his desires here, because his desires cannot align with each other. And emungere, I think, is not implying that Will's "true" desire is for

intimacy with Hannibal, that his desire to feel differently is somehow less "real." This is not simply a case of Will pretending he doesn't want to say yes when he "really" does. We are familiar with Will's deep sense of integrity and instinct to help others from both the fic and the TV show, neither of which oversimplifies Will into a repressed killer who denies the truth about himself. Will's desire to feel differently, to do differently, is important, and going against that desire is a genuine loss.

When the men discuss the situation soon after this moment, it is clear that Will is fully aware of how Hannibal has manipulated him and gained a hold over him, and how much that is influencing his desires and actions. When Hannibal says he did not expect Will to react as he does to the revelation, Will replies, "Maybe you should have. Captor bonding. Stockholm Syndrome. It's not uncommon for abused children to turn to their abuser for comfort. We're programmed to survive, not for maximum psychological health" (ch. 11). It is hard to tell how seriously Will is when offering this explanation, but readers, especially those who have the events of *Hannibal*'s first season in their minds, know that Will's ability to consent to intimacy with Hannibal has indeed been permanently compromised. This is a genuinely disturbing moment, and it would be easy to simply agree with this theory: Yes, Will has been manipulated. Yes, Hannibal has made Will dependent on and obsessed with him.

And yet—what, then, readers must ask, does Will do with the fact that he still wants Hannibal? What does he do with the fact that intimacy with Hannibal has made him feel better than he ever has before? Hannibal asks if he feels abused, and Will says that he feels betrayed.

"And yet you are still here."

"Where else would I go?"

"You have other options."

"I don't like my other options." (ch. 11)

Will has choices—certainly choices less impacted by Hannibal's manipulation—but he doesn't like them. He could turn Hannibal in to the police, or stop their sexual relationship, or kill Hannibal himself. As the rest of the fic goes on to show, he is still capable of taking charge of the situation, of defying Hannibal; he has not been brainwashed. Yet he has certainly arrived at his present desire for Hannibal through means that did not respect Will's consent and agency. So it is impossible for Will to tell what he "really" wants now.

Hannibal's response when Will walks in on him poised to murder someone—the previously discussed scene in which Hannibal explains that this situation is "outside the boundaries" of their sexual arrangement (ch. 12)—makes Will's conflicting desires extremely evident. He holds out the knife to Will and tells him to cut the unconscious man.

Will took a step back. "No. Why?"

"I want you to know what it feels like."

"I don't want to know what it feels like."

"I think you're lying." (ch. 12)

Hannibal presses the knife into Will's hand—literally closing his fingers around the handle, forcing him to take it—as Will says "I can't. I don't want to." But Will is not

entirely sure this is true: “he remembered how it had felt to cut into Hannibal’s skin. How clear everything had seemed.” Will puts the knife against the man’s flesh, thinking that “after the first cut, it would be easy” to keep going, to kill the man. He tells Hannibal that he’ll be “a different person” if he does this. Hannibal replies, “You are stretched between two worlds. This will be far easier on you” (ch. 12).

But Will says that he “never asked for an easy life.” Will needs to be conflicted, here; he needs to remain pulled between the desire to cut the man and the desire not to. He needs to be able to say no to something that part of him wants because another part of him doesn’t. I don’t read this moment as Will finally achieving some unified sense of self, in which all his desires line up with what he actually agrees to do; refusing to do what Hannibal tell him to in this moment does not mean that he understands what he “really” wants and who he “really” is. Instead, Will makes a choice to remain “stretched between two worlds”—a choice to remain conflicted. He makes a choice to not do something despite the fact that this choice does not wholly line up with his desires.

Or at least, he tries to. But Hannibal is convincing. He finds himself preparing to cut the man, insisting that he will be a different person afterwards. At the last moment, Hannibal takes the knife away.

He moves to stab the man himself. Will shoots him in the shoulder. Then, when Hannibal is in the hospital, Will diverts police suspicion away from Hannibal, destroys all his murder equipment, and makes plans to erase the last of the evidence linking Hannibal to a previous murder. He chooses to stay with Hannibal even though doing so goes against his integrity and desire to protect others; he chooses not to become like

Hannibal even though doing so tempts him on a visceral level. Will's desires are conflicting and will remain so. Even his ability to say yes or no to what happens will not mean that his desires are always aligned with what he agrees to. His desires are neither transparent nor consistent enough for this stable alignment of meaning.

4. Privilege, Whiteness, and Erotic Submission

In many ways, the conclusion of "Blackbird" endorses the system of consent despite its flaws, because Will does ultimately act with a great deal of agency; he is the one who masterminds the final events of the story and pushes Hannibal to stop killing. When Hannibal stops Will from cutting into the man, he finally respects Will's verbal insistence that he doesn't want to do something even though he suspects that part of Will does want to do that thing. Although neither of them is capable of maintaining full agency over themselves and their choices, given how conflicting their desires can be, they do reach a kind of balance that is facilitated by their arrangement.

Yet this conclusion cannot solve the problem at the heart of the story—the fact that consent has never been adequate to manage the men's desires, which are too all-consuming and too extreme to be both fully expressed and fully constrained by the system of "safe, sane, and consensual" BDSM. And it is still an open question how much Will is capable of fully uninfluenced choice, given his "empathy disorder" and consequent vulnerability. The fic remains critical of consent—not, I think, to undermine its political and social usefulness, but to point out the ways in which those whose desires do not fit within the structures of agential selfhood may struggle to figure out how best to live. By setting these questions about consent and BDSM within a world more extreme

than the one most of us occupy—a world of murder and cannibalism—emungere is able to throw them into sharp relief.

"Blackbird" contributes, then, to the critical and creative tradition of using BDSM—and cannibalism, too, as it happens—to theorize issues around sex, embodiment, violence, and consumption. It usefully dissects the limitations of consent and agency for those who, like the queer, neuroatypical Will and the queer Hannibal, have an ambivalent relationship to the model of agential subjectivity. Will's response to BDSM is due largely to his struggles with mental health. He is never really in a position to take on the identity of agential selfhood that white men supposedly have access to, because his mental health does not allow it. And Hannibal's cannibalism, no matter how much Will is repulsed by it, mirrors his own inability to stop himself from picking up and taking on the memories and personalities of others, to differentiate between his desires and theirs. BDSM and cannibalism both work as vehicles through which one may explore the pains, pleasures, possibilities, cruelties, tendernesses, fears, and desires of letting go of agential selfhood and the fantasy—at once so crucial and so limiting—that we can separate ourselves from others and regulate our desires and thoughts accordingly.

However, we must also consider how Will and Hannibal's subject positions as white cis men impacts their capacity to facilitate theorizations of agency and consent that are not strongly inflected by preexisting power differentials external to the men. This will help us understand the politics of emungere's fic, which I argue offers a queer critique of consent's limitations that, while useful, is rooted in a "whiteness as default" mentality that complicates its relationship to minoritized subjects.

Robin Bauer critiques the ideal of "harmonic sex," an imagined sexual experience that is fully egalitarian, for failing to acknowledge that *all* sex is infused with power dynamics (3). Subscribing to a fantasy that sex may be power-free makes it harder to see domestic violence, sexual abuse in families, and economic dependencies, and perpetuates racist and classist ideals of civilized progress (3). BDSM, by acknowledging that power is always present in sex, helps to accommodate those whose sexual practices and lives may not rest comfortably within white, bourgeois, cis- and heteronormative models of and individuality and what Bauer calls the "depoliticized, privatized and sanitized ideal of the pure relationship" (3). Yet BDSM's use of power dynamics is not always positive and non-problematic. Amber Jamilla Musser cautions us against reading BDSM as inherently politically subversive. She traces the critical reading of BDSM as transgressive through Freud, Foucault, Bersani, and Edelman. In this strain of queer theory, Musser writes, masochism in particular is used to unify "homosexuality, queerness, community, self-annihilation, and jouissance" against "reproduction and modernity" (17). Because BDSM emphasizes experiences of loss of agency, penetration, vulnerability, and non-reproductive sex, it "dislocates the subject and its claims to agency by replacing it with temporal suspension, sensation, objectification, and passivity" (17). Musser argues that this critical tradition relies on a "shared politics of marginality": it assumes that those who participate in BDSM are marginalized subjects whose identities and actions place sadomasochism "outside the bounds of liberal subjectivity," and thus exceptional and outside the norm (17). The problem with this reading, Musser writes, is that it is most legible when applied to subjects who are gay white men. It "imagines partners with

equivalent power that can be exchanged straightforwardly and is not external to these partners" (Musser 18). That is to say, it fails to take into account the impact that difference—particularly racial difference—can have on the power dynamics within BDSM. It is much easier to read submission as subversive when it is mapped onto the bodies of those who have historically been read as dominant. Musser writes that theorizations of masochism could do something different: rather than speaking exclusively to subversion, they could help us see "the multiple ways that people experience power and how that shapes the terms of their embodiments" (19).

Interestingly, this critique of scholarship on BDSM chimes strongly with critiques of scholarship on cannibalism as a subversive, queer trope. In both cases, the whiteness of the subjects renders their bodily transgressions potentially subversive and exceptional, whereas these actions might be seen very differently were the subjects people of color. In their article "Hannibal and the Cannibal: Tracking Colonial Imaginaries," Samira Nadkarni and Rukmini Pande examine the importance of whiteness within *Hannibal*, which usually goes unacknowledged by critics who discuss the show's depiction of cannibalism as aesthetic, queer, and attractively transgressive. "To put it bluntly," they write, "black and brown cannibalism cannot be aestheticized tropes to be explored in exquisitely detailed cinematography because it has already been operationalized against entire populations, wherein they are rendered *monstrous* to achieve significantly different ends—namely, imperialism and conquest" (Nadkarni and Pande 146). The racialization of cannibalism has strong roots in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British imperialism and U.S. settler colonialism and slavery. The specter of cannibalism has historically been

conjured by white imperialism to depict indigenous populations of the South Pacific, Africa, and the Americas as uncivilized and white explorers and settlers as vulnerable to the violence of these populations (rather than acknowledging that the latter were the violent invaders). Jeff Berglund writes that "For Euro-America, the discourse of cannibalism emerged in a cross-racial interchange, and recent cases suggest that, even when the interracial situation disappears or is transformed, the figuration of cannibalism retains traces of its racialized origins" (Berglund 4). In *Hannibal* and "Blackbird," then, cannibalism is racialized even in the absence of any obvious intention on the part of either text to think of it in this way.

Nadkarni and Pande argue that *Hannibal* follows in a narrative tradition in which cannibalism is used as "aberration for white morality and culturally specific for nonwhite communities," so that Hannibal's cannibalism is rich with interpretive potential while black and brown cannibalism is seen as a cultural practice that justifies colonial violence (148). Although critics have often described *Hannibal*'s cannibalism as subversive, Nadkarni and Pande disagree, due to the fact that representing cannibalism as subversive relies on Hannibal's whiteness, on seeing cannibalism as an exceptional act for the white, wealthy aesthete. As they discuss, Western concepts of cannibalism are linked with imperialism and colonialism. European explorers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries brought back stories of indigenous people who practiced cannibalism, primarily in the South Pacific and, later, in central Africa (Brantlinger 31). Patrick Brantlinger writes that most nineteenth-century observers assumed that cannibalism was practiced in many parts of the world, and that it "marked the low end of the evolutionary totem pole

from savage to civilized" (31). Although there has since been much scholarly debate about the extent to which cannibalism was actually practiced, if at all, Brantlinger argues that "skeptics and non-skeptics agree that stereotype of cannibal has had more impact on West than (possible) actual cannibals, and that the stereotype has been used as an excuse for the extermination of non-Western Others" (29). Colonial discourse on cannibalism used the alleged practice as a justification for subjugating black and brown people across the world: it claimed that they needed to be saved from themselves (Brantlinger 2-3).

This narrative also inheres in nineteenth-century American captivity narratives, which often describe indigenous Americans as practitioners of cannibalism. Jeff Berglund writes that accusations of cannibalism in such narratives function as a way to separate self and other—the civilized self and the savage, animalistic other. Yet cannibalism as a practice "collapses identity boundaries" and "threatens one's sense of integrity"; it threatens the very self/other divide it simultaneously shores up (Berglund 8). Early American colonists feared losing themselves to the indigenous cultures they encountered, and claiming that these cultures practiced cannibalism literalized this fear of being swallowed up by nonwhite cultures. Captivity narratives involving cannibalism, Berglund writes, thematize "estrangement from the familiar (and familial) and mark the concomitant terrors of destruction and incorporation into another alien body or group of people"; thus, cannibalism is "the discursive screen onto which such anxieties are projected" (Berglund 10). The idea of being consumed by another is rooted in colonial and racialized anxieties.

Kyla Wazana Tompkins' book *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the Nineteenth Century* expands the discussion of cannibalism to consider the black body's frequent nineteenth-century representation as being consumed (not always easily) by white bodies. Tompkins explores eating as "a trope and technology of racial formation during the first 130 years of the U.S. republic," arguing that whiteness was shored up and privileged in large part by eating culture, a site at which the boundaries of race and the body were threatened (2). Nineteenth-century eating in the U.S. threatened the liberal autonomous self by blurring the line between self and other and subject and object. By scrupulously managing what white American subjects ate—avoiding, say, "the richer foods of decadent monarchies or the exotic fare of the tropics"—the concepts of the white body and the white, middle-class nation could be protected (Tompkins 63). At the same time, representations of white bodies consuming black ones proliferated, suggesting that whiteness was created through the consumption of blackness. Tompkins writes, "In 'eating the other' the white self affirms liberal interiority through the metaphor of assimilation and digestion; blackness is the precondition, in these texts, on which whiteness is made material, both as body and as political actor" (92). Yet, Tompkins argues, the black body did not always go down easily—hence the term "racial indigestion."

Tompkins connects eating to erotics, as well—not eating as a displacement of sex, but a "form of sensuality, *in and of itself*," that she terms "queer alimentary" (69). According to nineteenth-century reformers of diet, like the pro-bread, anti-masturbation Sylvester Graham, "depraved eating had a disruptive affect on the body and society"

(69). Graham's writing allows us to think of eating as "a racializing practice that exists on a rhetorical continuum with dissident and nonnormative forms of sensuality" (Tompkins 73). This has a clear resonance with "Blackbird," in which eating and erotics are deeply intertwined.

Berglund writes that later cannibalism narratives tend to do a better job of critiquing the idea that self and other can be separated, thus breaking down the harmful notion of the Other as uncivilized and savage. Although Berglund's work on cannibalism was written before NBC's *Hannibal* aired, he does reference the Thomas Harris novels on which it is based and subsequent film adaptations. In these,

> cannibalism functions as the most extreme and heinous violation of another human being, but Harris also uses the metaphoric implications of cannibalism—the collapse of clear boundaries and the process of identity transference—to parallel detectives' attempts to commune with the minds of killers. Harris portrays the attempt to see and know as the Other—elementary identification—as akin to epistemological cannibalism. (16)

Yet as Berglund himself notes, because of cannibalism's deep historical connection with racialization, race remains a factor in how we read the Hannibal story. Tompkins, citing Peter Hulme, writes that "across modernity cannibalism has signified the total primitive otherness against which Western rationality—and its installation of the putatively ungendered and deracinated 'human' as its subject—measured itself" (Tompkins 94). So when in *Hannibal* and "Blackbird" the bodily practice of cannibalism is used to critique the agential self and engage with the terrifying, desired possibility of

merging with others, it does so by evoking colonial fears of physical and cultural consumption by the colonized population. Will and Hannibal do not occupy the black and brown bodies whose Anglo-American association with savagery and primitivism justified the brutalities of colonialism, who were seen as the threat to white liberal subjectivity. Thus, when cannibalism—or, for that matter, the practices of bondage, subjugation, and medicalized and eroticized violence of BDSM—is reclaimed as a potential site of transgression *against* white liberal subjectivity, we ought to, as Nadkarni and Pande argue, consider exactly who benefits from this transgression, and how their racial identity plays into this. Hannibal's very whiteness is what enables the transgression.

It is useful, too, to consider the history of nineteenth-century British gothic depictions of Eastern European identity. Within this tradition, Hannibal's racialization is somewhat ambiguous, occupying a peculiar space between whiteness and not-whiteness. Hannibal is from an Eastern European noble, wealthy family—Lithuanian, specifically. He is a count, and he has a lot of money. His tastes are capital-D decadent: exquisitely tailored patterned suits; sculptures and paintings; rich, dark interior decor; ornate plateware and ornate food; even a suit of samurai armor (in classic nineteenth-century Orientalizing Decadent manner).[24] In season three, Will visits Hannibal's shut-up, crumbling, very Gothic childhood estate. Season three also reveals that Hannibal's first killings happened in Italy, where he is known as "Il Mostro"; several episodes strongly

[24] For a discussion of *Hannibal* as a contemporary update of late nineteenth-century aestheticism that links evil and beauty, see Glock, *Aestheticism, Evil, Homosexuality, and Hannibal: If Oscar Wilde Ate People* (2017).

evoke the sinister Italy of gothic novels by Ann Radcliffe and Wilkie Collins, among others.

These classically gothic aspects of Hannibal also evoke the trope of vampirisim, which Nadkarni and Pande briefly mention as a potential link between cannibalism and the aristocratic aesthetics of *Hannibal*. When placed within the genealogy of the British Gothic tradition, the reading of Hannibal as vampire reveals another facet of the sexual, economic, and racial threats Hannibal presents. Like the monsters of Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and Stoker's *Dracula*, Hannibal is from Eastern European nobility who, due to hunger and economic circumstances, move out of their native country. In their new home, they prey on the locals, most centrally, a vulnerable white specimen—of Britishness, in the novels, and Americanness, in the television show (though Hugh Dancy, who plays Will Graham, is in fact very much from a white, affluent, well-educated British background). Hannibal's connections to nineteenth-century vampire tropes place him in dubious relationship to idealized whiteness. H.L. Malchow links the "savage cannibal and gothic vampire" due to their "uncontrollable hunger infused with a deviant sexual sadism" (124). Malchow writes that the vampire connects fears of sexual deviancy—clearly relevant in Hannibal's case—with fears of racial contamination. Ardel Haefle-Thomas argues that the nineteenth-century vampire anxiously recalls the "intersections of queer desire, miscegenation and imperial anxiety" (96).

While it seems ultimately correct to state that *Hannibal* displaces these racialized anxieties onto the white Hannibal Lecter, subsuming them into the more obvious sexual and economic threats Hannibal poses, the process by which this displacement occurs is an

odd one; it relies on a shift from one context, the nineteenth-century British gothic, to another, that of twenty-first century U.S. television. Hannibal's whiteness would not have been so stable in nineteenth-century British literature. Eastern Europeanness occupied a peculiar racial site in nineteenth-century Anglo-American constructions of race, during which the concept of races as clearly delineated and scientifically classifiable emerged. Scientific racism centered around the ranking of races from most to least civilized, with white (implicitly male) British people at the top and Africans at the bottom. Those from the far East ranked above Africans but were still low on the ladder. This system, influenced as it was by Darwinian notions of evolution and corresponding fears of atavism, held the threat of cultural mixing and degeneration that could prompt someone—or a whole society—to slide down the ladder. Continental Europe was considered a potential source of corruption (more decadent, more Catholic), and Eastern Europe in particular, with its associations with Jewish and Roma people, was not exactly considered "white"—though it was more white than the locations that occupied lower rungs of the ladder. Thus, Eastern Europe could both undermine British whiteness, by contaminating it, and reinforce it, by separating it from even less "white" places and peoples.

When an FBI trainee is profiling an unknown killer that the audience knows is actually Hannibal, she objects to her boss's presumption that the killer is white; "there's something exotic about him," she says ("Entrée"). Hannibal's exoticism is echoed in interviews with Bryan Fuller, the show's creator: "Hannibal in the books is an Eastern European gentleman. He's not American. With Anthony Hopkins, his accent was very

hard to pin down or pinpoint his origin, but for me, casting a foreign actor was the way to go because Hannibal is foreign. He is other. He's an exotic. That was something that Mads brought to the character, with this erudite quality of experience and worldliness" (Neumyer interview). Hannibal's accent, though, isn't Lithuanian—it's Danish, because it's Mads Mikkelsen's accent. That's not what's important: what's important is that he sounds neither American nor British.

Furthermore, Hannibal, like the nineteenth-century vampire, has links to locations even farther East. According to Bruce McClelland, vampire myths crossed over to Western Europe during the eighteenth-century as a result of the Austro-Hungarian vampire epidemics (84). During this cultural crossover, especially in English literature, Eastern European vampires became associated with locations even farther East—with "Turkish, Arab, or Muslim culture, which seemingly had absorbed the ancient mystical knowledge of Egypt and Mesopotamia" (McClelland 148). Hannibal, meanwhile, is associated with Japan. Although his aunt (by his Lithuanian uncle's marriage), the Lady Murasaki, does not appear in the television show, Hannibal's connection to Japan persists in his home decor, the titles of the second season of episodes (all of which are Japanese names for meal courses), and, in season three, the appearance of his childhood friend and family attendant, the mysterious rifle-toting Chiyoh.

All of this is to say that *Hannibal* continues the British Gothic tradition of ambiguously racialized antagonists who are close enough to their white victims that they pose a threat of corruption and infiltration, yet separated enough from them to draw a distinction between themselves and their white victims. Hannibal's association with

cannibalism and whiffs of non-normative sexuality—which become central and explicit in "Blackbird"—are thus textually associated with racialized tropes of Otherness and monstrosity, along with the oft-connected tropes of the degenerate, Continental aristocrat. In this context, Hannibal is not unambiguously white.

Yet in the context of *Hannibal* and "Blackbird," which take place mainly in and around the U.S. capitol, Hannibal *is* unquestionably white. He certainly reads as "exotic," but he is also displaced from the British Gothic context in which his racialization as not-quite-white-enough would be legible. Within the ostensibly color-blind world of the U.S. portrayed in *Hannibal*—the cast is relatively diverse but race rarely plays a role in how the story unfolds—Hannibal reads as white. He is foreign and eccentric, but he has the privileges of a white man; the things that might set off alarm bells for those around him are neutralized by his wealth and whiteness. He also has the clout that money brings in a U.S. milieu less attuned to the supposed dangers of the degenerate European aristocracy. Within the U.S. depicted in the show and in emungere's fic, Hannibal's variously constructed racialized aspects, which link him to Eastern Europe, Italy, and Japan, are less traceable as rungs on the ladder of scientific racism and more a kind of set dressing that allow him to read as "exotic" to U.S. American audiences. He carries all the racial anxieties of the nineteenth-century British Gothic, but without that context, it is fairly easy for Americans to read him not as "not really white" but as simply rich and eccentric. And because he can read as eccentric, rather than as the genuine threat more coherent and explicit racialization would construct, he gets away with murder. This means that he can

engage in practices like BDSM and cannibalism with less suspicious and more "transgressiveness" than a nonwhite subject would.

BDSM in "Blackbird" and cannibalism in both "Blackbird" and *Hannibal* offer characters and readers a way to experiment with the possibility of ceding the hard-fought agential, insular self. Emungere shows how relieved Will is when he finally accepts that he cannot maintain this mode of selfhood, during the earlier scenes of BDSM but even (maybe especially) after Hannibal is revealed to be a killer and thus capable of actually harming Will. Yet, as Musser notes about BDSM and Pande argues about cannibalism, to simply represent these bodily practices as transgressive and exceptional, as a way to critique and chip away at harmful aspects of the agential self, is to ignore how gender and racial difference plays into the possibility of reading these practices in this way. As Pande argues in *Squee from the Margins*, most scholarly work on *Hannibal* has lacked "any acknowledgment of the fact that Hannibal's whiteness is at the heart of the narrative's ability to aestheticize the aforementioned taboos," and discussions of race have revolved around nonwhite characters "instead of considering the whiteness that is necessary for the entire conceit of the show (and further, the fandom) to function in the first place" (Pande 7). So while I want to signal that Will's mental health does place him outside normative concepts of agential male selfhood, and that Hannibal belongs to a gothic tradition of ambiguously racialized monstrosity, the fact that they both have access to the privileges of white maleness in American and European society is a crucial factor in "Blackbird's" ability to use bodily transgression to explore the concept of consent.

I do think we can read "Blackbird" as simultaneously reinforcing *and* critiquing the narrative of white bodily transgression that we see in certain accounts of BDSM and cannibalism in *Hannibal.* It is undeniable that the fic fits squarely within the tradition of fanfiction that explores issues of consent, oppression, non-normativity, and transgression—issues closely linked to people who are not cis white men—via two cis white men. And Will has access to bodily transgression as a site of pleasure and relief, and as a coping mechanism for his neuroatypicality, largely because of his whiteness. He reads as though he ought to be capable of liberal subjectivity; he is not, because of his neurodivergence. BDSM allows him to some relief from the difficulties of his neurodivergence and allows him to maintain the facade of liberal subjectivity. I don't think it's particularly valuable to place Will on some sliding scale of "more privileged" to "less privileged"; rather, we should acknowledge that his major source of privilege, his whiteness, allows him to more easily access practices that help him cope with his major source of lack of privilege, his mental health.

In the end, after all, he and Hannibal get away with it. Will erases all evidence of Hannibal's crimes—destroying his equipment, framing another murderer for Hannibal's killing, disposing of a body in a swamp—and the men rejoin society and continue their work and their lives. This is hardly a triumphant moment in the story; Will does not fool himself into thinking that his actions are moral or justifiable, and the reader is not asked to set aside their own concerns about Hannibal's behavior. Yet they get away with it. If they were not white men, even on a purely practical level, it is hard to imagine this

happening. And their anchoring in whiteness allows them to balance, on a psychological level, the need to maintain a front of liberal subjectivity and the desire to reject it.

This anchoring in whiteness returns us to the Victorian spirit medium. If we read the medium's erotic submission as navigating their complicated relationship to power and vulnerability, we must also consider how whiteness helps that navigation run smoothly. Emily A. Owens writes that in early U.S. American law,[25] the "ability to express consent was the pinnacle of reasonable citizen-subjecthood," accessible to white men, partially accessible to white women, and inaccessible to enslaved people. In nineteenth-century American and British culture, white women were considered, both legally and culturally, less capable of reason, and thus less capable of consent, than men. It is the *partial* inaccessibility I think spirit mediums are grappling with when they adopt the position of erotic submission: it allows them a way of circumventing the centrality of consent, a way of psychologically grappling with their peculiar position in relation to power and authority, an acknowledgement that consent and agency are neither entirely effective nor entirely fulfilling. But they can play more easily with the position of erotic submission because it is safer to do so from a position of partial access to privilege than no access at all. In ceding partial control of their bodies and minds to spirits, mediums are represented as temporarily relinquishing their agency, their access to liberal subjectivity. Yet whiteness is a powerful anchor in at least the possibility of agency—a fact which certain

[25] It is perhaps inconsistent to cite U.S. American law in relation to the primarily British spirit mediums I have been discussing, but in addition to the fact that there was a great deal of transatlantic movement within nineteenth-century Spiritualism, early U.S. American law's basis in Enlightenment thinking makes it relevant to Britain.

Spiritualist practices emphasize. In texts describing materialization séances, mediums often materialize the spirits of people of color. American Indians were especially popular, while D'Espérance frequently materialized "a young Arab girl" named Yolande (248). These frequent reminders of the medium's own whiteness serve to anchor them more firmly within an implicitly white mode of liberal subjectivity even as their vulnerable openness distanced them from it.

Katie King's pale, pretty appearance gets scrutinized—indeed, rhapsodized about—in many depictions of Cook's séances. These depictions emphasize her otherworldly attractiveness, what G.L. Ditson describes as "ravishing beauty" (Sargent 59). Ditson writes, "I had before me a young lady of an ideal beauty, supple, elegant, and clad in most graceful drapery, with chestnut locks visible through her white veil. Her robe, trailing like that of an antique statue, entirely covered her naked feet. Her arms, of surpassing beauty, delicate, white, were visible to the shoulders. Their attachment to the body was finely statuesque; and the hands, a little large, had long, tapering fingers, rosy to the ends" (Sargent 59). This "ideal beauty" is clearly linked to Katie's paleness; her naked skin is lingered over and her arms are "of surpassing beauty" in part because they are "white." Gully, like many others, emphasized the whiteness of Katie's apparel, which seemed to set off her white limbs and face: "The spirit, Katie King, appeared this time dressed in a longer and more flowing white dress than usual, the sleeves reaching to the wrists and bound there, whilst over her head and face a beautifully transparent veil fell, giving to the whole figure an appearance of grace and purity which is not easily conveyed by words" (Sargent 62). Another observer, George Henry Tapp, wrote that Katie's arm,

which he stroked from hand to shoulder, had skin that "was beautifully—I may say, unnaturally—smooth, like wax or marble; yet the temperature was that of the healthy human body" (Sargent 65). The smoothness and paleness of Katie's skin, along with the lightness of the white draperies in which she enwraps herself, are important markers of both her beauty and her otherworldliness. Given that, as noted above, Katie and Cook were frequently doubled with one another, similar enough in looks to require frequent comparison to ensure they were not the same person, Katie's whiteness may reinforce Cook's, although Cook has darker hair (Sargent 64, Crookes 9) and is less beautifully ethereal.

Katie's paleness also serves to contrast with the darker skin of many spirits materialized at the time, who were not infrequently people of color. D'Espérance's most common spirit guide was Yolande, "a young Arab girl of fifteen or sixteen years…who soon became, as it were, the leading feature of our séances; a slender olive-skinned maiden whose naïveté and gracefulness made her the wonder and admiration of the circle" (248). Yolande's clothes also accentuate the color of her bare skin, but its darkness rather than fairness: "Her thin draperies allowed the rich olive tint of her neck, shoulders, arms, and ankles to be plainly visible. The long black waving hair hung over her shoulders to below her waist and was confined by a small turban-shaped headdress. Her features were small, straight, and piquant; the eyes were dark, large, and lively" (251-252). And her dress, "of Eastern form, displays every limb and contour of the body" (255).

Marlene Tromp argues that while the manifestations of such racialized spirits can be read in part as effecting a distinction between the white spirit medium and the non-white spirit, they also undermined that distinction. Regarding Yolande, she writes, that the "lack of boundaries between the Arab woman and Englishwoman's bodies disrupted the monolithic notions of race and racial identity that undergirded the imperial project. Rather than maintaining Englishness as a coherent and unified white identity or the Arab, Indian, or African woman as evidently and entirely other, the whole notion of racial purity was disrupted by the shift from Espérance to Yolande and back again" (Tromp 88-89). She points to the fact that spirits were often represented as more powerful and more enlightened than the medium as indicating that "the English clearly had a great deal to learn from these colonized women who seemed to lack power" (91).

Tromp also considers Katie King's implication in racialized spiritualist practices. Katie's whiteness is at times blurred, as she sometimes darkens the color of her skin. For example, "On one occasion Katie, on coming out of the cabinet, held up her right arm, which was of a dusky black color. Letting it fall by her side, and raising it again almost instantaneously, it was the usual flesh color like the other arm" (Sargent 65-66). Tromp points to a similar manifestation in which Cook produces a black face that transforms into Katie, arguing that here "the lines are again blurred between the colonial object and the British subject.The proper white Katie and her black counterpart cannot be fully separated, as the spirit and her medium cannot. Instead, the incorporation of the colonial subject threatens the identity of the white figure— even if it is explicitly deployed to shore up that identity" (91).

It is possible that these representations of racialized manifestations prompt the kind of "alternative ways of thinking about and imagining the world" that Tromp argues they do (90). Certainly they undermine the possibility of absolute racial purity. Yet, as Tromp's final phrase above indicates, such materializations are also deployed to shore up white identity. Representations of mediumship, as I have argued, facilitate a critique and partial undermining of agential subjectivity, allowing participants to access alternative modes of being within a reasonably useful, though ultimately inadequate, system of consent. Yet this departure from agential subjectivity is partial, and possible, due to the whiteness of the mediums described in the passages I have examined. On a practical level, whiteness allowed these mediums to retain some respectability and remain within the sphere of middle-class British and American society. On a more figurative level, these forays into racialized embodiment allowed white mediums to use their ideas about people of color (whether believing them more savage or more spiritual) to access temporary relief from the demands of white subjectivity while always ultimately returning to it. I don't disagree that such forays may also have prompted some rethinking of racial purity and colonial mastery, or deny that, as Molly McGarry writes of the prominence of Native American spirit guides in the U.S., these practices sometimes spurred involvement in actual reform movements. But when thinking of Spiritualist practices as exploring the possibilities (however painful) of modes of being other than agential subjectivity, we should, as when we consider the potential subversiveness of BDSM, note how the whiteness of the participants anchors them within the realm of agential subjectivity even as they stray from it. Female mediums, of course, were not

fully agential subjects, but then again the myth of white femininity is that complicity with white patriarchy will ultimately provide access to its privileges. Perhaps they were close enough to the ideal bourgeois white subject that they could afford to engage in practices that threatened or provided relief from the demands of agency without risking permanent expulsion from its benefits.

In the end, erotic submission is a practice that can help particularly vulnerable subjects manage the risks and problems of their positionality. Yet as we have seen, the challenge of maintaining this practice in the face of the nontransparency of desire and the difficulty of establishing meaning around sexuality, as well as the incomplete accessibility of erotic submission based on one's proximity to privilege, renders it only partially useful in the search for a more ethical queer sexual politics. The self must therefore keep searching, turning down the next path, to the next possible option, the next digression, the next attempt.

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"Edging, or, Experimentation, Intimacy, and Failure in greywash's 'build your wings'"

Greywash's BBC *Sherlock* fic "build your wings" began, as she puts it in her notes on the first chapter, as "basically just pornographic brain-break junkfic, the fictional equivalent of having Snickers and Mountain Dew for a snack; and I just basically don't care that much" (2). It has been a work in progress since 2015, with a continually climbing projected chapter count, and currently sits at 259,679 words. Its posting schedule has been erratic, periods of regular updates interspersed with long hiatuses, the most recent of which began in February 2019 and shows no signs of ending. Since greywash mostly left Tumblr in December 2019, when the site banned pornographic images (including fanart depicting sex and, notoriously, "female-presenting nipples") and has not updated her Dreamwidth page since June of 2020, it is doubtful whether the fic will ever be finished. Around the time of the Tumblr porn ban, I was briefly in contact with her through my short-lived attempt to incorporate Tumblr into this project—abandoned due to the overwhelming irony of trying to use a suddenly kink- and sex work-averse site to critique purity culture—but I have since been out of touch with both her and her partner, hbbo (havingbeenbreathedout on her erstwhile Tumblr, breathedout on Archive of Our Own), as have my fandom friends. Her most recent fic, a 3,000-word *The Magicians* one-shot, was posted on Archive of Our Own in January of 2020. So I don't know whether she ever plans to pick up "build your wings" again.

I haven't tried to find out. "Build your wings" is a fic about edging; fittingly, it may never reach its conclusion. Its nearly 260k words, most of which are certainly not the

fictional equivalent of junk food, involve explorations of intimacy, trauma, gender, consent, and the thorniness of desire, mostly though extremely drawn-out sex between the BBC versions of Sherlock Holmes and John Watson. The story's entire premise is that, while participating in the multitude of sex acts described in the fic's tags—including, but not limited to, "spanking," "prostate massage," "rimming," "public sex," "somnophilia," "ageplay," "physiologically implausible sexual fantasy," and "nipple clamps"—Sherlock never has an orgasm. If the fic is never finished, Sherlock will exist forever in this limbo of emotionally fraught sexual frustration—though, of course, it is also possible that the fic may finish and Sherlock still may not.

This situation imparts a peculiarly meta level to the fic's investment in edging. It is almost too obvious to compare the readers' long wait, with completion sparkling on the horizon but never quite in reach, with the wait inherent in edging. Were the fic officially abandoned, that would be different; it would mean readers knew that they had everything that they were going to get, and that they would have to either make peace with not knowing how the story would be resolved or imagine a resolution of their own. But the absence of such assurance, combined with the fact that the fic has undergone substantial hiatuses before (though none quite so long), as well as the indication that it is planned to have a set number of chapters (80), dangles the possibility of continuation and, perhaps, eventual resolution. Sherlock may, someday, come. John and Sherlock may, someday, figure out how to be in relationship to each other without hurting each other beyond what is tolerable. Certainly, they may not. But they might. And that keeps everything suspended, and open.

The fic begins with Sherlock telling John that he hasn't had an orgasm in twenty years. He says, "I choose not to" (3). What constitutes "choice" is problematized both immediately and excruciatingly slowly over the course of the fic. Whereas "consent" was a main keyword in discussing "Blackbird," I would argue that "choice" is a slightly more useful and accurate term to describe the key conceptual node of "build your wings." Whether or not Sherlock wants to, agrees to, or is capable of having an orgasm is certainly tied to the concept of consent, most obviously through John's promise not to make Sherlock come unless given permission. Yet the questions around Sherlock's refusal to orgasm—the whys and hows of it—cannot be answered simply by him saying yes or no to his sexual partner. One reason is that his refusal to orgasm is something he himself must enforce: it is somewhat tautological to say that Sherlock does not give *himself* consent to cause himself to orgasm. Another is that, well into the fic, Sherlock goes through a period of saying he does want to orgasm, but when he tries, he has a panic attack and shuts down. Whether he is unable to climax due to a psychological block he can't control or whether he loses his nerve and/or desire at the last moment is unclear. This calls into question the nature of "choice": while Sherlock insists that not orgasming is a choice—he is in fact extremely vehement about this—the reader, and John, eventually question what exactly it means to "choose" *not* to orgasm if Sherlock also appears in some way incapable of choosing *to* orgasm. Can one choose not to do something if one cannot do that thing anyway? Finally, the fic slowly introduces the question of how much "choice" stands up under the pressures of systemic power imbalances and personal trauma. Very gradually, Sherlock's sexual history—of which

John was entirely unaware—unfolds; it transpires that the last time Sherlock allowed himself to have orgasms was when he was a teenager in a relationship with an adult man. Sherlock absolutely refuses to read this relationship as anything but benign, suggesting that the only problem with it was that ultimately, he did not like being in a loving relationship because it alienated him from his sense of self—a twist on the classic Sherlock Holmes position that he eschews sex and relationships because it distracts him from his work: "Grit in a sensitive instrument, or a crack in one of his own high-power lenses, would not be more disturbing than a strong emotion in a nature such as his" (Doyle 429) John, however, cannot help but worry if Sherlock's refusal to orgasm and his extreme vulnerability around intimacy are the result of a traumatizing, abusive relationship. The pathologization of his refusal to orgasm, however, offends Sherlock deeply. And by the end of the most recently posted chapter of the fic, the issue of whether Sherlock is indeed "choosing" not to orgasm, along with all of its attendant complications, remains unresolved.

Edging structures both the sexual relationship centered in the fic and the fic itself. In this chapter, I will consider the specific ways in which edging restructures intimacy. In this chapter, I will argue that edging affords, through its effects on temporality, a more robust, more resilient mode of intimacy, one that can accommodate conflicting desires, breakdowns in communication, and repeated failures to prevent harm. It opens up a mode of never-quite-ending-possibility, urging participants toward a climax or culmination that is both imminent and constantly just out of reach.

1. "(deliberately) glacially paced fucking": Edging and Time

Edging's usefulness is facilitated primarily by its effects on time. It elongates time, intensifying each moment while stretching out overall encounters. It changes the structure of these encounters as well; instead of building to a singular climax, they ebb and flow within the virtually unlimited amount of time they offer. Edging facilitates movement back and forth between slow, gentle moments and intense points of crisis; each time completion is imminent, the clock starts over.

Greywash emphasizes the temporal aspect of edging in the fic's brief summary, which is what readers see when they are deciding whether to open the fic: "Sherlock hasn't had an orgasm in twenty years. John is intrigued" (1). The edging has already been going on for a very long time when the fic begins, suggesting that edging not only elongates the forward motion of time but also its backward motion. Additionally, the very first sexual encounter between John and Sherlock is time-based: When Sherlock reveals that he hasn't had an orgasm in twenty years, he justifies it by saying he'd prefer not to need to waste six and a half minutes twice a day to "maintain the ability to carry on an intelligent conversation" (6). John protests at the brevity of six and a half minutes, so Sherlock challenges John to masturbate for that long without coming while he times him. If John fails, he will owe Sherlock six and a half minutes of his time for whatever Sherlock says, to be claimed later. John becomes acutely aware of the passage of time as Sherlock starts the timer and "turns the phone around so that John can see the rushing-up flood of fractions of seconds as he digs his palm into the flies of his jeans" (8). Time, here, moves both especially slowly (in fractions of seconds) and especially quickly (the

rushing-up flood). Time is also the reason John loses the bet. Sherlock points out how quickly he is going: "You still do it like this all the time, do you […] just yank at yourself as hard and fast as you can, like if you don't get off in three point four seconds your mum'll catch you when she comes in" (8). At this point, after only three minutes and forty-two seconds, John orgasms (8). Right from the beginning of the fic, greywash foregrounds the pace and length of the men's sexual encounters, immediately bringing to our attention the effect that edging has on experiences of time.

John's entry into Sherlock's sexual life continues to affect his sense of time as their relationship develops. After their first encounter, John feels "off-kilter": not properly oriented in time and space (9). When he asks Sherlock if things are "getting weird" between them, Sherlock doesn't answer right away; instead, he begins "moving slowly…terribly slowly…Slowly, his hand comes up, and slowly his fingers uncurl forward; and slowly, he touches John's mouth" (10). John touches his tongue to Sherlock's fingers, and then the chapter ends. The earliest readers, therefore, had to take their own pause before the encounter continues, since each chapter was posted at a different time. Even current readers, who can move right on to the next chapter, still have to take a tiny pause that drives home the peculiar pacing of the scene. Most sex scenes in fanfiction are not split up by chapter breaks; even long ones tend to begin—and end, usually with mutual orgasms—within a chapter. The early short, oddly segmented chapters in "build your wings" emphasize the temporal effects of edging as a practice and a narrative structure.

The slow pacing also allows John to discover and then navigate Sherlock's extreme skittishness about discussing his desires and feelings. At the beginning of the next chapter, John begins to touch Sherlock's chest very slowly, unbuttoning his shirt one button at a time. In this moment of slowed-down time, between each unbuttoned button, John is able to ask Sherlock whether their interactions so far have been all right: whether John is doing okay, and whether it feels good. Sherlock tells him multiple times that it does. Soon, the check-ins become about Sherlock's level of arousal. John agrees that he will stop as soon as Sherlock asks him to. He has to do so not long after; when John touches Sherlock's erection through his underpants, they have to take a pause. This is an intense moment; Sherlock, voice wavering, says that John's touch was perhaps "a bit—too good" (15). They wait, and then begin again:

> "Sherlock is still awkwardly braced above him. Watching: lips parted, wide-eyed; and flayed and burning John bends back down to press an open-mouthed kiss to the long twitching stretch of Sherlock's thigh. Sherlock's whole body jerks, and John pushes: stretching strained fabric up towards his groin—kisses—and again, tasting salty sweat and, and soap and musk-bitter, and—
>
> "'Stop,' Sherlock gasps; and John rocks back down onto his feet, folds his hands on his knees.
>
> "Sherlock has his eyes closed, tight. His beetroot face turned to the side. He is taking long, steady breaths in through his nose, out through his

> mouth, in through his nose, out through his mouth, with splotchy red blotches of flush following the path of John's mouth up his thigh." (16)

The intensity of this exchange comes largely through the dynamic of pushing forward and pulling back, the start-stop way in which their intimacy unfolds. John, and apparently Sherlock, are both eagerly aroused, their bodies responding rapidly to each other's touch. It is also an emotional moment: readers familiar with BBC's *Sherlock* will be cognizant of the fact that Sherlock and John are still healing from the rift in their relationship caused by Sherlock faking his death for over a year after a period of very close friendship with John. It is a tricky, emotionally risky sexual encounter, one that may dramatically change their friendship as well as one that, though John is not yet fully aware of this, threatens Sherlock's sense of self.

Edging offers Sherlock and John a premise they can use to navigate Sherlock's vulnerability and anxiety around sex while pretending the touchy, easily hurt Sherlock isn't extremely vulnerable and anxious. The need to not make Sherlock come requires that John constantly ask for verbal consent to continue touching him without signaling that that's what he's doing. It gives Sherlock an out; when things become too much for him, he doesn't have to admit that they're too much emotionally—instead, he signals that they're pushing him closer to orgasm than he wants. At the same time, edging helps the men slow down rather than plunging into what may be a momentous turning point in their relationship.

Edging also helps John manage the fact that he and Sherlock's sexual desires and habits are very different. John has had a lot of sex with both men and women and feels

little to no shame about it. He is quick to become aroused, likes things fast and sometimes rough, and can experience a wide range of intimacy within sex. Once he and Sherlock begin their sexual relationship, John starts wanting Sherlock intensely and all the time. He is frequently described as being "already" aroused earlier in their encounters than seems reasonable: "already breathless" (8), "already hard" (8), "already opening up relentlessly for all of him all over" (24), "already red-faced shuddering" (24), "fucking *pounding* for him already" (29), "half-hard already" (67), "already hard as a rock" (95), "already so eager his toes are cramping up against his feet" (106)—and so on. John finds he must exercise a huge amount of restraint:

> "When Sherlock bends closer, John has to force his knees and wrists and elbows locked, hold himself stiff with his hands by his sides because all he wants to do is push Sherlock back and then back and then back against the table against the wall through the door into Sherlock's bedroom and out onto that vast white-sheeted bed to sprawl their bodies tangled together with his hands in all that hair and kiss and kiss and kiss. He doesn't. He holds himself stiff and straight with his hands in fists, and Sherlock breathes out hot against his temple. His cheek. Brushes his nose across John's right eyebrow, and John closes his eyes." (26)

John must actively fight against his own desire. The language here is one of constraint and willpower: he must "force" and "hold himself"; his body becomes "stiff and straight," hands in fists. He keeps his "knees and wrists and elbows locked," the word "locked" invoking shut-up rooms, handcuffs, impenetrable boxes. Meanwhile, he

imagines moving “out” onto the bed so they can “sprawl” and “tangle,” the words conjuring images of opening up, loosening, intertwining. It is frustrating for John to have to restrain his emotional and physical desire for Sherlock. There is pleasure here, but also discomfort. Yet within the structure of edging, John is able to withstand the discomfort. And within the limited amount of contact between them, apparently minor things like Sherlock’s breath against his temple and his nose brushing John’s eyebrow take on a heightened significance. Even though Sherlock is unable or unwilling to fully open himself up to John in this moment, the intensity created by their arrangement infuses meaning and pleasure into the small things Sherlock is able to do. Edging allows for intense intimacy to develop between the men, in a close, constrained little world where both physical feelings and emotions are constantly charged by the lack of consummation.

Additionally, edging offers time and space for Sherlock and John to figure out what they like, both individually and as a pair. Because the structure of edging forestalls the usual arc of a sexual encounter—foreplay, genital stimulation, orgasm—each of Sherlock and John’s encounters is by its nature unscripted. The need to carefully monitor what is too stimulating for Sherlock offers a pretense, as I noted above, for taking particular care with his anxiety and vulnerability around sex. But it also guides the men towards more experimentation, opening up a wide range of acts and sensations that might otherwise appear secondary or specialized. The habit of checking in on Sherlock’s proximity to orgasm expands to become a practice of checking in on both the men’s levels of arousal and pleasure as a response to specific interactions. Thus, edging makes accessible new

scripts for sexual encounters, a wider range of experimentation, and a heightened attention to each partner's preferences.

One example comes relatively early on, when John asks Sherlock if it's okay if he penetrates him anally: "'Can I go in at all?' John asks. 'Or is that—'" (46). Sherlock responds by pointing John towards the lube. John, however, perhaps noticing that Sherlock did not in fact say he wanted John to finger him, gets them both onto the bed, starts touching his penis—something Sherlock has previously said was okay—and suggests they come up with some sort of scale: "Something like—one for utterly uninteresting, two for nice but not terribly electrifying, three for interesting enough that I ought to do it again—" (46). The ensuing banter is both playful and earnest; John jokes that they ought to go about it "scientifically," meaning he will start at the top of Sherlock's body and make his way down (47). Within the confines of this premise—its balance between joke, experiment, and pleasurable erotic encounter—and the ever-present promise that Sherlock will not come and John will not push too far, Sherlock is able to communicate fairly openly about his preferences. He is also able to be very specific, changing the number as John moves his mouth down his body in short increments. He is able to differentiate between what he likes generally and what is arousing within this particular scenario, and to note the differences between himself and John: "'Here?' John murmurs; 'Five,' Sherlock says, rough, 'or, or four, it'd be—but right now—'; 'It's probably a seven on me,' John murmurs, and Sherlock moans, 'I know'" (49). The nuance and precision here are unusually advanced.

When John first reaches a high number, eight, Sherlock squirms until John pulls back and he can take some calming breaths. John asks if eight is where he needs to stop. Sherlock changes the subject, asking why John masturbated in the shower earlier; this tactic, in which he avoids answering questions about his own desires by diverting focus onto John's, is fairly common for Sherlock, but it doesn't work here. John asks again if eight is where he needs to stop, and Sherlock says he thinks it'd be different at different times and then expresses inarticulate frustration: "I just, I can't—" (48). John tries out a guess, suggesting too long is too much. Sherlock agrees.

Not long after, Sherlock begins to get uncertain, not able to answer if something is a six or a seven, repeating, "I don't know. I don't know" (49). John suggests they let up for a minute, and they lie together and kiss for "a long time. The sun red and gold through the windows, purpling like a bruise. Dreamy, John thinks, warm and airless in his second-storey room. Close" (49). This turns out to be merely a hiatus in their sexual activity, and they resume the scale again once Sherlock is more relaxed. This kind of extended pause for physical and mental reorientation is more possible, I would argue, when edging is structuring the encounter: there is no foregone end to the sex, so it is easier to start and stop, to move between higher and lower levels of speed and intensity. It creates a "warm and airless" and "close" atmosphere in which time and the expected shape of a sexual encounter are suspended and the two men are allowed to be intimate in a variety of ways. It also helps John resist Sherlock's diversions or attempts to rush them, instead heightening his attention to the nuances of Sherlock's reactions and responses and giving him time to help sort them out.

The encounter peaks again and again. Each time, they must navigate the complexity and conflicted nature of Sherlock's desires; each time, John reaffirms his commitment to honoring what Sherlock asks for, despite his own arousal. For example:

> "Sherlock says, 'Nine—John,' ragged at the edges, 'nine, I wanted—'
>
> "'Another time, maybe,' John says. Tasting Sherlock on the sides of his tongue.
>
> "'Is that.' Sherlock swallows. 'All right.'
>
> "'Yeah.'" (50)

Sherlock's desires are at odds with each other here: he wants both to keep going and to stop before he risks coming. By suggesting the possibility of "another time," John allows this conflict to simply continue existing without turning into a crisis. He even makes it pleasurable to some extent by creating anticipation for a future encounter.

They slow things down, but the same thing happens again:

> "'Ten,' Sherlock gasps, and then groans, low in his throat. 'Fuck. I want you to do it again.'
>
> "He lets go of John's hips, presses the heels of his hands over his eyes, breathing deep. John still braced up on his knees and his palms above him: he rolls, carefully, onto his side.
>
> "Sherlock breathes. Breathes. His red face still hidden under his hands.
>
> "'Could always do it later,' John says, finally; and Sherlock laughs, wet. Drops his hands and turns his head, looking at John. Honeyed by the lamplight." (51)

Once more, Sherlock expresses a desire to keep going, but also a desire to stop. The repetition of this pattern—peaking and then backing off—keeps the encounter in a peculiar stasis that protects Sherlock, allowing him to test out the limits of what feels safe and pleasurable without ever having to resolve his complicated, conflicting desires. Once more, John suggests "later," reinforcing the idea that they have plenty of time to work out what Sherlock wants and needs.

Working within the structure of edging requires intimacy, communication, and cooperation. When the men next reach a point of nearly overwhelming intensity, it becomes clear how important John's trustworthiness and care are for this to work. Not for the last time in the fic, Sherlock tries to push himself beyond his stated comfort level, possibly because he is driven by arousal, possibly because he knows John is highly aroused. John begins rimming him, and asks if he can go further. Sherlock says, "'Yeah, you can—fuck. Nine, don't—don't stop,' so John doesn't stop" (52). Although his arousal level is at a nine, he tells John explicitly not to stop; John, for a moment, takes him at his word. Sherlock's body language and actions indicate pleasure and a desire for John to continue:

> "Sherlock is shameless: voice broken up in his throat, shoving back onto John's mouth into John's hands, and it'd take a stronger man than John to resist the way Sherlock opens right up for John's tongue as deep as his teeth, shoving his prick into the mattress with his tongue up Sherlock's arse held open while Sherlock squirms squirming wanton and breathless and if Sherlock would just let him, if moaning underneath him humping at

> the air Sherlock could just bloody well hang on John could make it so good, get him dripping with it, fucking sodden, so wet that John could get three fingers up him—maybe four, get him wide-open soaked and begging for it by the time John shoved in so wet they wouldn't even need the lube downstairs on their living room floor.
>
> "John jerks himself back, panting. 'I. I think I need to stop,' he gasps, kneeling up; then laughs, looking down at himself." (53)

Everything about Sherlock suggests he is okay with John continuing. First, he tells John to keep going; then, he pushes into John's touch while making noises of pleasure. And John's desire to continue is overwhelming, even to the point of frustration—he fantasizes about what how would do if if Sherlock "could just bloody well hang on." But the structure of edging hems them in, stops them from going too far. John knows that, even if in the moment Sherlock appears to want more, he has promised not to make Sherlock orgasm. He knows that breaking that promise will hurt Sherlock. And he recognizes that his own desire to keep going is dangerously strong. So he stops himself, stops them both. He honors the fact that Sherlock's wants are irresolvable: that even when Sherlock's body seems to be urging him forward, another part of Sherlock needs John to hold back. Stopping the action in this moment helps build trust between them and allows Sherlock more space to deal with the complexity of his desires. The sexual encounter continues, at a more measured pace. John comes; Sherlock doesn't. When they finally settle down, the realize that a lot of time has passed. It's fully dark and they still haven't eaten. Again,

edging has stretched time and suspended regular life, creating a space in which the men can work out how to be together.

2. "the map of a path he can barely conceive": Edging, Desire, and Fantasy

Edging's ability to facilitate extended encounters that rise and fall in intensity helps John and Sherlock to better navigate some of the most difficult of Sherlock's sexual vulnerabilities. As the fic progresses, John starts to understand just how complex Sherlock's feelings are about sex, and the particular shape that these feelings tend to take. Very, very slowly, he begins to suspect that Sherlock's feelings about his own gender are complicated in some way. The two of them begin pushing at the edges of these feelings during their sexual encounters, but this area is clearly a minefield for Sherlock. He appears to have some affinity for femininity, but his mostly unspoken desires to, at times, experiment with femininity are entangled with his desire to be soft, to receive tenderness and care—desires which, for reasons John can work out only dimly and slowly and treacherously, are steeped in shame. Without the structure of edging—its way of stretching and slowing time, of making space for starts and stops and missteps and do-overs, of eliminating the possibility of a definite end to each encounter—it seems likely that Sherlock's gender feelings would not have been able to surface, even in such a partial and agonizingly slow way.

Almost three-quarters of the way into what has been posted of the fic so far, John tries to articulate to himself the incredible difficulty of navigating Sherlock's desires around both gender and intimacy. He feels it is "bizarre…to want so badly to be able to to *ask*, to give Sherlock space to unfurl himself, to bare his wanted things for John so that

John could give them to him; and to understand, just as deeply, how often it'd be a cruelty to try" (320). Instead, John has to pick out the patterns of Sherlock's behavior over the course of their ongoing sexual encounters, noting "Suggestive trends: tenderness and care; cruelty, objection, disregard" (320). Sherlock has hit John, caned him, called him names, pushed him around; he has also, under the guise of claiming the six and a half minutes he earned from John, lain in bed with him and kissed him for ages and ages and ages.

During this latter encounter, John realizes, "weirdly desperate," that before they started sleeping together, he hadn't known what Sherlock would want, but that he'd have given it to him anyway: he wouldn't have understood, but if Sherlock had asked to lie in bed naked with him and kiss for a long time, he'd have said yes (186). He thinks, "Sherlock had to've already known that…He must've known that—but he didn't, John is realizing: he didn't know, and so John is watching Sherlock's face shifting by micrometers; softening, at all his angular edges" (186). A hundred and thirty-some pages later, John is still struggling to convince Sherlock he is willing to do whatever Sherlock wants, including being soft and gentle with him. Despite Sherlock's sharp edges, he sees something different hiding in him, a desire for "cosseting, petting, *looking after,*" but he knows Sherlock is afraid of wanting these things and suspects he is ashamed as well (320). John "doesn't know what to do about any of it. Does his best. Gets it wrong, often" (320). Edging allows him to get it wrong, and to try again; to take it slowly, and to work with all of Sherlock's evasions and hesitations.

As John is thinking all this, they get into the bath together, and John is immediately confronted once more with the difficulty of navigating Sherlock's desires. John massages him tenderly, until he is sleepy, relaxed, and loose; Sherlock says, still sleepy, that John "could fuck me…if you wanted" (322). John, startled, thinks to himself he ought to step carefully; he asks Sherlock several times if that's what Sherlock wants, explaining that he doesn't feel a burning need to do so, even though Sherlock is saying he could. Finally, he says, "I'm not entirely clear whether you actively want me to fuck you" (322). When Sherlock, after a long moment, replies, "Me neither," John says they'll "table it" for the moment (322). John is learning that Sherlock telling him he can do something does not necessarily equate to Sherlock wanting him to do it, and that Sherlock's desires are not always clear to himself. He is learning to listen very carefully to what Sherlock does and doesn't say, realizing that Sherlock sometimes gives explicit verbal consent for things he's not sure he really wants.

This slowing down—tabling penetrative sex for some other time—allows them to remain in the realm of intimacy and eroticism. Instead of escalating, John touches Sherlock's chest and nipples, feeling "nonsensical and incandescent" (323). This, however, ratchets things up again, making Sherlock's breath quicken and his legs fall open in a way that seems directly related to the feminized way John thinks of what he is doing: "cupping Sherlock's breast"; "play[ing] with his tits" (323). Sherlock urges John to touch him more, escalating the encounter as he often does when John is taking things slowly and gently—though as usual it is unclear whether the escalation is because he feels good and his arousal is spurring him on, or because he is uncomfortable being in

such a gentle space, or both. Either way, John touching Sherlock's cock ramps up the intensity to a point where what is pleasurable for Sherlock in one moment slips over into being unbearable in the next. John says he is going to touch Sherlock for hours, and Sherlock says he wants it, agrees "in a heat-cracked voice" when John asks if he wants him to "pull you open, to—to pull you apart…to pull it out of you"; but then it is too much (324). As John touches the head of his penis, Sherlock, presumably too close to coming grabs at him but stops just before touching him: "squeezed-released arms trembling held-hovering not touching while John exhales on the seam of his jaw" (324). Then he says he didn't say John had to stop. But John "felt it like a lightning bolt, didn't he: Sherlock's body locking tight with that sudden surge of terror, or shame, or misery; the tight-clinging clench of his fingers knotted up on themselves on John's wrist which had—released, and then slammed just over John's forearm to dig into Sherlock's own thigh. Swallowing rabbit-fast pants. Hiding away" (324). He asks if Sherlock wants him to stop. Sherlock says he wants John to keep touching him. John says he'll keep touching him, but asks if he want Sherlock to jerk him off. Sherlock says, "I want—I want you to fuck me across the bathroom counter, I want to come down your throat, I want—yes, I want you to jerk me off, John, I want—" (324). But John stops him, asking if he wants him to jerk him off right now. And Sherlock whispers, no.

Here, the stricture that John cannot let Sherlock orgasm saves them from an interaction that Sherlock claims he wants but really doesn't. Edging, again, slows things down. John guesses that Sherlock really just wants to kiss more, and Sherlock agrees, so

they do—the pace ebbs again, and John helps Sherlock calm down. They are then able to return to the hint of gender play that Sherlock seems to desire so much but is so afraid of.

Much earlier in the story, John finds an unopened purple eyeliner in the flat. He doesn't know if Sherlock bought it for himself or for a disguise for a case; he doesn't bring it up. Now, in the bath, John gets it out, though he doesn't know whether Sherlock will welcome it: "Forward, he thinks: through darkness, blind" (329). He suggests he try it on Sherlock; Sherlock agrees. It is, John thinks, "beautiful" (330). As he kisses Sherlock, "John wants—he wants to be bigger. He wants to gather Sherlock up, carry him to bed, toss him onto clean sheets and roll about and kiss him and kiss him and kiss him: it isn't a coincidence, John doesn't think" (330). The fic doesn't clarify what exactly John means by this—what, exactly, isn't a coincidence. But in the context of the scene, it seems likely that John means his desire to be bigger than Sherlock and to toss him around corresponds to Sherlock's more feminized look while wearing the eyeliner. This evasiveness on the part of the text around Sherlock's gender play is typical; neither John, Sherlock, or the narration itself tend to straightforwardly articulate that Sherlock is perhaps interested in being femme or feminized. This reflects Sherlock's inability to talk about his desires, and requires the reader to do the same sort of difficult interpretive work that John must constantly engage in—to skirt around the edges of desire, to come at it in indirect, careful ways, to evade as much as possible the chilling effects of shame, fear, and vulnerability.

The perilousness of this particular desire is made evident in the subsequent chapter, which graywash describes in the notes as "about 34,000 words of (deliberately) glacially

paced fucking" (332). This chapter contains the most extensive exploration of Sherlock's gender feelings and demonstrates why the structure of edging makes possible experimentation—and its attendant missteps, failures, and risks—that would otherwise be too damaging or too difficult. The chapter is more or less split into two main parts: John and Sherlock trying on lingerie, and John talking them through a fantasy of being teenage girls having sex after school. Each part unfolds very slowly, as John carefully attempts to determine what Sherlock wants and how to give it to him.

The lingerie has already made an appearance in the fic; earlier, John purchases it and tries it on himself while Sherlock is out of town. The resultant exchange—a series of photos and texts—goes rather badly wrong; Sherlock is unable to take it in the tender, exploratory spirit in which John means it and says some humiliating things to John that, though conventional within a particular sort of kink, aren't really what either of them want. Sherlock then requests that John erase the texts and try to erase the memory of them as well. This disastrous exchange might well have been the end of it, but in the slow, almost hypnotic haze of their extended, never-climaxing encounter in the "bath that'd left Sherlock so dissolved he'd told John he didn't like something, almost," Sherlock is able to reintroduce the subject (336). The eyeliner opens up the possibility of gender play, and Sherlock uses it to transition into talking about the lingerie: "Sherlock asks, 'You didn't buy all that stuff because you like wearing ladies' knickers, did you.' Very softly" (331). The verb "asks" in conjunction with the period at the end of Sherlock's question suggests that Sherlock knows a bit more about his desires, and what's going on with John's attempts to decipher them, than he is comfortable stating

outright. He phrases it like a question, but he already knows the answer. John doesn't break the mood; he kisses Sherlock and, speaking slowly and quietly and asking first if Sherlock is all right, confesses that he "thought it might be hard" for Sherlock "to ask" (331). Here again, he doesn't state directly what it would be hard for Sherlock to ask, forgoing straightforward language in order to help Sherlock, who says, under his breath, "It is" (331). The indirectness of both his language and his actions are made possible by the slow, ever-unfolding time and space of edging, which doesn't demand that they hurry towards a conclusion or escalate at a steady, consistent pace.

John, again, is the one to try on the lingerie. When he takes it out of the box, Sherlock is tense, "huddling in over his hunched ribs and folded belly, red all the way down to his thighs"; the very presence of potential feminization makes him fold inward on himself, removing some of the loosening and unfurling effects of the bath (333). Greywash emphasizes how slowly and gently John moves here: he tries to be "casual" and "careful" (333); he keeps his voice "light, careful, light" (334). Although John is not turned on by dressing in lingerie, and they both know (but can't say) that Sherlock is the one who actually wants to wear it, John understands the continued importance of slowly and indirectly approaching Sherlock's desires:

> "*Is this it?* he thinks. A riddle wrapped in a mystery trapped inside feeling like an absolute wanker: John keeps catching himself half-recoiling, uncomfortable and bemused, from the idea that he is, at this moment, dressing himself up in stockings and a suspender belt, a thing he'd never thought of before this week and finds perhaps twenty percent appealing

> and eighty percent absurd; while trying both to make it seem like the easiest thing in the world and to not hide a bit of how awkward he finds it; that it can be, quite frankly, silly, but that he'd do it anyway; that it could be—uncomfortable, and—and fiddly, and still for either of them *safe*, with the strange prickling stretch of fabric on his skin not entirely unlike arousal existing just alongside the ridiculous sticking-through ends of the hair on his legs; this peculiar task that he has given his body: trying to suggest, blindfolded and gagged, through—through fucking interpretive dance, the map of a path he can barely perceive for a man he is coming to realize he only half understands." (334)

John is trying to thread an extremely small needle, here, by showing Sherlock it's okay if sexual and gender experimentation is a little bit silly and awkward, at the same time as showing him it doesn't have to be excruciatingly difficult. Greywash italicizes the word "safe" to suggest it is John's most important goal: to make this safe for them despite the discomfort. All the while, John is having to operate without fully understanding Sherlock and what he wants—he is a "mystery," a "riddle." John feels himself extremely hampered in his ability to communicate with Sherlock, equating his attempts to "interpretive dance," in large part because he is only now starting to recognize that not only does he not know how to show Sherlock the way, he only half understands Sherlock in the first place.

In fits and starts, through a series of missteps that take them perilously close to ruining the encounter, they eventually get to a place where Sherlock can admit that he

wants John to put the stockings on him. When he does, he reverts to the same hunched, closed-up position as when they first got out the lingerie: “Sherlock shifts his weight in his hips; plucks at the lace again, shoulders hunched disconsolately: that painful sunburn-bright flush all the way down his shoulders and his back and his thighs” (361); clearly uncomfortable with the way they restrict and emphasize his genitals—emphasize, that is, that he has a penis—he says, “I feel like an idiot” (362). John finds him lovely and arousing and, when saying so doesn’t convince Sherlock, tries to show him physically by kissing him gently, feeling “sodden. Heavy. Supersaturated with care” (362). This feeling of excess, of languidness, of slowness, helps John pull Sherlock back into the drawn-out time of edging, in which breathing and kissing are all that need to happen, in which the urgency of arousal can be put on hold. He soothes Sherlock into releasing some of his anxiety. Then the pattern repeats; their desire escalates as they touch each other more desperately; Sherlock gets too close to coming and they have to stop. Everything slows again as Sherlock takes the next step in the gender play and puts on the bra.

He says he “look[s] like a stork in fancy dress” (367). John, again, must find a way to calm him, to show him that this experiment can be awkward and silly and lovely and safe, that those things are not mutually exclusive: “Sherlock does look like a stork in fancy dress, and John thinks he's never seen anything half as lovely in his life” (367). With difficulty, quietly and haltingly, John, flush with desire, tells Sherlock, "You're the most beautiful girl in the world” (368). He slowly introduces the fantasy that they are both women. He asks Sherlock haltingly if he will put his finger’s up John’s cunt. Again, Sherlock goes “hunched” (368). John can’t quite articulate his next question, or is afraid

to say it to directly; he says, “Is that—do you want—is that—all right, if I—” (368). The question veers between whether this feels good to Sherlock, whether Sherlock wants it, and if it’s all right if John does what he’s doing; John is beginning to understand that for Sherlock, pleasure, desire, and consent are not always aligned, even as he also understands that to articulate this too clearly will shut Sherlock down. There is also a suggestion in the fragmented structure of the question that John perhaps is not entirely clear what he is asking for; the final em dash signifies both John’s inability to pinpoint what he wants to do and also the fact that Sherlock cuts him off with a “Yes” and kisses him and pets at his asshole.

It is hard to know, both for John and the reader, whether Sherlock is cutting John off because the answer to all three of John’s implied questions (is this good, do you want this, is it okay if I do this) is yes, or whether Sherlock simply wants to go ahead even if he’s not sure of the answers, or whether his physical arousal is pushing him to ignore his ambivalence, or whether he just wants to please John. John, who is trying so hard to make Sherlock feel safe, good, and cared for, takes Sherlock’s “Yes,” his obvious arousal, and his continued petting at John’s asshole as an okay to keep going. Although there is still some uncertainty as to how much and in what way Sherlock desires this encounter—uncertainty that will eventually rear its head in damaging, painful ways—at the very least, the structure of edging contains the encounter so that it does not go so far as to destroy the men’s relationship. John thinks,

> “If they were other people right now Sherlock could roll him over, spit, rub it into him to rewet the lube he spent all morning fucking up into him

> and then but they aren't. But they aren't. The people that they are are kissing and John is shivering drawing his knee up wanting as exhaling out into John's mouth Sherlock is rubbing against him, his two wet fingers meeting—John and it feels. A part of him, it could be—him, wet for Sherlock, getting—wetter while hot-faced Sherlock breathes into him half-kissing sharing breath while John is rubbing his—his lovely little breasts." (368)

Instead of escalating to penetrative anal sex, Sherlock's need to stave off orgasm instead sends them down a different path, a path without a clear endpoint, one whose meandering, endless rubbing and touching and kissing puts John in mind of sex between cis women. Edging allows them to continue experimenting while also assisting with the gender play.[26] Rubbing against each other, getting wetness all over their thighs, feels, John thinks, "*real,* it feels real, it feels *real*" (368). They keep kissing and touching, both of them using language like breasts and clit to describe their bodies as John comes for the

[26] I think it's important to note here that while in this encounter, having a vagina, clitoris, and breasts are associated with being a woman, greywash's fic does not at all subscribe to this in general. The gender play that John and Sherlock engage in tends to feminize Sherlock by associating him with traditionally cis feminine traits largely because Sherlock's masculinity seems to have cut him off from the kind of tenderness and vulnerability that are culturally associated with women and, as we will see later, younger people. Additionally, having John and Sherlock call assholes cunts and penises clitorises undercuts any potential biological essentialism the reader might infer. In short, while greywash (and, consequently, I) often use gendered language around genitalia, I want to emphasize that this practice is in service of Sherlock realizing his complex relationship to gender rather than reifying falsely essentialist understandings of gendered bodies. The whole point is that Sherlock can't really figure out his relationship to masculinity or femininity, maleness or femaleness.

fourth time that day and Sherlock gets so close to coming that he has to pull sharply out of John's mouth and hold himself tightly.

Sherlock's abrupt halt to their activities gives John an opening to ask him about what he's feeling. He knows this is difficult for Sherlock, so he first asks if he can ask: "'Can I—ask you, about.' John licks at his own lip. 'I mean, I don't want to push you, Sherlock, but it's. Hard, to play this one by ear'" (375). Again, we see John not quite articulating what it is they are discussing, simply ending with "about." rather than saying what he means. When Sherlock finally nods, he observes "carefully" that Sherlock got "very close"; still balancing irreverence with earnestness, he asks if it was because he's "just such a fantastic cocksucker, or—" (370). As when he is attempting to ask about Sherlock's response to John talking about his cunt, the em dash signifies both John's uncertainty about how to articulate what he's asking and Sherlock's subsequent "Yes" (371). And as in that moment, this "yes" is somewhat ambiguous. This time, though, John pushes on it, which leads Sherlock to pull away from him, "saying, 'It was because you told me I was pretty and played with my tits, which did you think it was, John?' in a tone so thick with loathing and regret that the back of John's neck prickles: angry, hot" (371).

He calms him: yet again, as he has so many times over the course of this long, long day, he is confronted with Sherlock's fear and shame and tries to soften the mood, slow things down. And again, he manages to coax Sherlock into sharing just a little bit more about what's happening inside of him. Sherlock tells John—still using the indirect language characteristic of these exchanges—that John makes him feel like he "could be a

stork in a fancy dress" if he wanted to (371). When John asks if he does want to, Sherlock says, with a sigh, "Not. Exactly"; that, he says, "would be simple" (371). Here, John is confronted with the peculiar, often frustrating way that desire can be strangely individualized—the way that one's desires feel raw and dangerous even when there is evidence that they are in fact shared by many others.

> "It is nothing new, John is thinking, under this sun or any other; but he'd never say it. It wouldn't help. Sherlock has always been precisely that kind of self-involved: charmingly convinced of his own uniqueness; exasperatingly egotistical about the specialness of everything he thinks; and lonely, all the way down at his little inextinguishable animal core. He's not the first man to like ladies' knickers and a bit of role-play, but John can believe that it feels like he is: that unhappiness is radiating off him, is part of what John is touching, with Sherlock in his arms." (371)

Sherlock's desires interact with his personal history and his personal tendencies in ways that neither he nor John can control. Navigating this requires care from John—he has to know when to not say things not because they aren't true, but because they won't help. He has to take Sherlock's insecurities and flashes of self-loathing as they come, even when he doesn't share or understand them. He has to keep soothing and slowing him down in order to even get Sherlock to articulate his own confusion; the ebbs and flows of this "(deliberately) glacially paced fucking" allows him to repeat this process again and again, as many times as it takes (332). In this particular slowed-down moment,

> "Sherlock is curved in towards John's body in John's bed like—like an uncertain plant-ish tendril, at the very coldest harshest starting edge of spring: in the quiet John rubs their knees together in their stockings and pets at Sherlock's ribs, at his satiny shoulders, at the cut of his collarbones and the taut-strung lines of his throat; as millimeter by millimeter Sherlock slow shifts his whole body closer, uncurling towards him: like the unwinding whorls of a tender green growing little fern." (371)

Whereas in moments when intensity peaks and Sherlock is overwhelmed, he is described as tight, crouched, curled away; here, "in the quiet," he is curved towards John, shifting minutely closer as John rubs him gently and Sherlock starts "uncurling," "unwinding." Finally, he admits he has a hard time believing that his feminization arouses John, despite John's (honest) attestations to the contrary. Sherlock asks half-jokingly if John will tell him he's pretty while playing with his tits. John says yes, and "'I'm not just telling you, you know […] You're beautiful. I want to tell you as often as you'll let me.' It sounds rough. It feels rough: 'Whether or not,' John adds, 'you let me play with your tits'" (372). Even though John is expressing something tender, it feels and sounds "rough"—unsuited to the mood of this long, soft, unspooling moment. It is so hard to say exactly what he means when saying exactly what he means sometimes causes Sherlock pain, despite—or perhaps because—of how loving and gentle he is trying to be. He admits that he feels "out of his depth" with Sherlock sometimes (373). He is "trying to hold everything Sherlock needs from him inside him, overfull: his hot lesbian girlfriend. This ill-fitting, man-made-for-him skin" (373). Sherlock's interiority is so opaque to John still, and yet

the parts of it he has accessed are still nearly more than he can hold, making him "overfull." But he wants more, thinks that Sherlock "is—opening up for it"; "He would—bloom: and eyes prickling John presses his face to Sherlock's skin breathing him in and in and in. Sherlock lying flat on his back spread open and opening unfurling for him with need and so. So John's chest would—it is aching. He breathes and he feels it; it aches. Beautiful, he thinks he is thinking. Beautiful. All right" (373). Again, greywash employs the language of unfurling, and more directly the language of opening—John's desire for Sherlock's opening. Things get "easier," John thinks, as Sherlock kisses him and he feels "echoing, cavernous. Carved paper-thin, to make room" (374)

And it does indeed get easier for a time, as Sherlock voluntarily brings up John's fantasy of him as John's "hot lesbian girlfriend" (374). Once more, the soft slow moment transitions into something more fraught, though the roleplay allows John to feel that he is "unspooling, out from all his new space" created by the image of them as girls just messing about for hours and hours with no built-in goal or end (374). He begins to describe a scenario for Sherlock, as Sherlock prompts him with questions and suggestions. Sherlock furthers the fantasy of them being teenagers, saying it sounds like John has "snuck me up to your bedroom […] While your parents are away" (375). Throughout the ensuing encounter, they kiss and touch with increasing need as John tells the story of how he, as a high school girl, might have brought Sherlock home on some flimsy pretext of wanting tutoring, both of them knowing they were going to have sex; as the intensity escalates, both of them clearly physically aroused and invested in the fantasy, John urges Sherlock to contribute to the story. Sherlock says John would be older

and more adventurous and would have a vibrator; John fingers Sherlock's arsehole as they narrate how he would fuck Sherlock with his "cock," adding another layer of gender play, men playing at women with vaginas playing at one of them having a penis (378). The tense switches between the imperative—"Show me how to fuck you" and the future perfect—"Sherlock would, he would fit his fingers in against John's hard shuddering purple cock shoved deep into his body while John—while John slipped his fingers over the hard nub of his clit and rubbed and then rubbed and then rubbed" (379). Gender gets even slipperier, as they fantasize at being women but the narration continues to use masculine pronouns for them both. The gender play and ageplay ramp up as they describe scenarios of watching and wanting each other at school. John then introduces the idea that he has never "done this," never been "bare like this, with—with another girl" (379). This additional layer to the fantasy emphasizes the imagined girls' inexperience and age—specifically, in a way that John clearly experiences as tender, meaningful, and about the significance of his connection with Sherlock.

This particular fiction also blurs the lines between the fantasy and John's feelings about his actual relationship with Sherlock. To some extent, he seems to be expressing a wish that he had known right from the start that Sherlock was the only person for him. In reality, before Sherlock fakes his death, John doesn't think he's sexually interested in men until, grieving the supposedly dead detective, he sleeps with a friend of Sherlock's. Elsewhere in the fic, John admits to himself that he feels guilty about not having been more self-aware, or more careful with Sherlock's attachment to him, earlier in their

friendship. This erotic fantasy, enabled by edging, allows John to explore his own anxieties about his feelings for Sherlock.

Those feelings continue to spill over the edges of their fantasy as the scene progresses. John tells Sherlock that he watches Sherlock in chemistry and thinks about touching his breasts and then "I think about us like this […] and then I think about us—older […] I think—I think about us grown up" (380). He thinks about them "somewhere else," about

> "lying down with you while—while my parents are in Weymouth and—and after you, after you've undone my bra after work and—and in your room at Cambridge, every night for three years […] I think about us in—in Rouen, or in that awful bedsit— […] or my flat with Harry […] or stretched out on the sofa, just—just downstairs— […] we're— […] older […] or old, we're—all sorts of women or—or we're schoolboys, or grown men" […] we could be—anything—everything, I think […] And I'd still want—every version of you, […] every part of you […] All those mes […] wanting—wanting all those yous, al-always." (380)

In all the gaps between these gasped-out fragments of images, they are touching, fucking, breathless and close, Sherlock apparently hanging onto every word, and after John says "always," there is "like a crack Sherlock's voice, lashes squeezing shut tight: 'Oh—John—Christ—'" (380).

> "In John's arms Sherlock's body locking down seized tight while forehead to forehead John watches him in kaleidoscope pieces heart fluttering:

> Sherlock's body torn out of his body so close to his body as eyes blurring Sherlock blinks—and gasps—forced up pressedtight to John's braced-close empty body as he—
>
> —gasps—
>
> —and for an instant John wonders why he doesn't feel Sherlock flooding wet over his fist and his wrist at fucking last, as beneath him Sherlock's jaw is grinding, clicking shuttight—
>
> —and then Sherlock's green eyes startling wide-open lifting up away from John's face panicked—panicked?—as they—shine—filling up—
>
> —and John's stomach plummets, as Sherlock moans squeezes his eyes shut tight wet gushing out over his temples around the edges of his cheeks and then. Sherlock. sobs: torn, carved out of the center of him: a bone-deep agonized animal noise that John heard himself make exactly once, on his knees on bare floorboards, on the ninth of June, 2014."

This whole crisis moment is one long em dash-filled sentence. At first, John believes that they have finally reached the ultimate peak in both the day's extended sexual encounter and their recently-begun sexual intimacy: he believes Sherlock is having an orgasm. He watches Sherlock locking down," "seized tight," his "body torn out of his body" as "forced up" he is "pressedtight to John's braced-close empty body" and interprets these movements as a sexual climax, one that is—as Sherlock's would likely be, considering he hasn't come in twenty years—intense, raw, and overwhelming. Yet in the next moment,

he realizes the reality is precisely the opposite: his interpretation could not be further from what Sherlock is actually going through. Rather than coming, Sherlock is shutting himself down and locking himself as tight as possible so he *doesn't* come. Instead of wetness spilling out of his penis, it spills out of his eyes as he sobs a horrible sob John compares to his own verbalization of his grief at Sherlock's supposed death in 2014. Every indication Sherlock has been giving him during their encounter, both verbally and physically, suggests—was clearly *meant* to suggest—his enthusiastic participation. Yet it leads to this moment of agonized refusal. At the same time, it is possible that Sherlock has not been deceiving John about his enthusiasm up till this point: John doesn't know, and so the reader doesn't either, whether Sherlock means to stop himself from coming or whether it happens involuntarily.

Sherlock cannot articulate what happened, either because he doesn't know or doesn't want to say. He sobs, panicking, as John tries inadequately to comfort him; ultimately, he can only manage "Fuck, John, I'm—I can't, I'm sorry" and "I don't, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I don't know what's wrong with me" (381). Whether "I can't" means he won't let himself or that he literally cannot orgasm isn't clear, not to John and quite possibly not to Sherlock. Sherlock experiences a very different kind of crisis than an orgasm, but one that engenders equally earth-shattering noises and movements: "John wraps his arms around him, heart pounding, holding tight-tight-tight while Sherlock paws at John's back and John's shoulders and helpless John rubs at his neck and Sherlock's ribs heave—and grind—and heave—" (381). Sherlock's panic attack continues as John says over and over again, helplessly and ineffectually, that it's all right, that there's nothing

wrong with him; the approximately 34,000-word chapter ends with John whispering, "I'm so sorry. It's all right. It's all right" (382).

This marks a major moment of failure in the men's relationship. Something has gone wrong. Yet edging allows them to continue to work through it: even this terrible moment does not mark the end of their relationship, but another ebb, another low point. Edging can accommodate even this degree of failure.

3. "I chose to live like this": Edging and Choice

This scene reveals the extent to which edging can facilitate continued intimacy despite major missteps and moments of hurt. It is a crisis point in John's increasing suspicions that Sherlock has been doing things he did not fully want; it drives home the impossibility always accurately ascertaining what Sherlock really wants and feels, no matter how much he participates in and appears to actively desire what they are doing. It also seems, through its thematization of teenage sex, to relate directly to the outline of Sherlock's prior sexual history that John has very gradually been discovering. As more of Sherlock's sexual past is revealed, John begins to worry that Sherlock is dealing with long-term sexual trauma. One possible result of this trauma is that Sherlock is nearly incapable of asking for, or possibly even knowing, what he actually wants. Sherlock appears unable to separate out what feels good physically—what is arousing—and what feels okay emotionally; in fact, John begins to suspect that Sherlock has been giving him consent for things that he doesn't really want, or at least that part of him doesn't really want. He fears that Sherlock has been doing things primarily to please John, to keep him from leaving Sherlock.

After Sherlock's panic attack, John cannot ignore his fear that Sherlock is too confused and, quite possibly, traumatized to be able to know what he wants and feels, or even to safely navigate conflicting desires. John can no longer avoid his instinct that perhaps Sherlock's fraught relationship to sex, desire, and orgasm was caused by something—specifically, his relationship with his last boyfriend, when he was a teenager. Yet the structure of edging continues to serve them as they navigate this new obstacle, not by preventing harm and miscommunication, but by stopping those moments of failure from becoming the end of their relationship. It allows John to gradually understand more about Sherlock and amend his behavior.

Throughout the fic, John picks up bits and pieces of information about Sherlock's youth. He eventually comes to suspect that Sherlock had bad sexual encounters before he decided not to orgasm—which, John knows, would have been when Sherlock was still a teenager. But it isn't until nearly three-quarters of the way through what currently exists of the fic—not very long before the previously discussed sexual encounter with the eyeliner, lingerie, and teenage girl fantasy—that he actually gets the story from Sherlock.

From what John has gleaned before that point, he knows that Sherlock had a hard time as a teenager; he was a misfit and a late bloomer. He learns now that Sherlock's mother was largely absent due to her career, sometimes living abroad for years at a time. When they are discussing her, Sherlock lets slip the name Jacob, whom John immediately guesses was a lover. Sherlock can tell that John assumes something bad happened with Jacob, and says: "It wasn't—whatever you're thinking, it wasn't like that" (308).

"It wasn't like that" is Sherlock's mantra when it comes to his sexual history. As soon as they begin discussing this history, John starts to think in terms of pathology and trauma. Sherlock can tell that this is happening; he guesses that John imagines Sherlock's sexual anxieties and refusal to orgasm can be traced back to a bad sexual experience in his youth. It is extremely important to Sherlock that John not think this way: he absolutely rejects the idea that he was taken advantage of or hurt as a teenager. Sherlock says that the awful thing about having been young is that everyone thinks of things as "pathological"—he can't just have had an interesting yet absent mother; "it has to be a great tawdry melodrama about child neglect and abandonment and. And everything everyone in your family did wrong, and everything that *happened* to you. […] Not—not things you chose, or didn't choose, or—all the people you thought about being and then—then decided not to be" (308). It is incredibly important to Sherlock that he think of himself as having had agency over his choices both as a teenager and as an adult.

The subject of choice is a fraught one throughout Sherlock and John's sexual relationship. As becomes clear in the lingerie/teenage girl sexual fantasy scene, it appears that Sherlock may be doing things with John that at least part of him doesn't really want. Whether this is fully a "choice"—to willingly accept discomfort because he believes it is worth it—or whether Sherlock feels he has to in order to prove something to himself and to John, is a complex question. It becomes increasingly hard to tell whether it makes sense to call Sherlock not orgasming a choice, since it seems possible that Sherlock is, at this point, physiologically unable to let himself even when he desires to do so. The revelations about Sherlock's sexual history seem to be strongly linked to his insistence

that everything he does is a choice and to his refusal to admit that there may be both internal and external pressures limiting his ability to control what he wants, says, and does. Greywash purposely makes it hard to tell whether this history is the root cause of Sherlock's attachment to the idea of choice, or whether it is one significant instance of a larger hangup around the idea of choice.

John finds it difficult to safely navigate the subject of Sherlock's sexual history. Carefully, he asks about Jacob: "'He was a thing that you chose'; and fast, impulsively, Sherlock says, 'Yes'" (308). The quickness of Sherlock's response suggests defensiveness, perhaps a lack of conviction. As Sherlock reluctantly tells John about his history with Jacob, it becomes clear why it revolves so much around the question of choice: when they were together Sherlock was seventeen, while Jacob was twenty-six (309). While today a seventeen-year-old Sherlock would be over the age of consent, he was not when he was with Jacob. This is, in part, due to homophobic legislation: an equal age of consent for gay men in the U.K. (sixteen) was not set until 2001; from 1967 till 1993, gay men had to be twenty-one to consent to sex, and from 1994 till 2001, they had to be eighteen (Stonewall. org). For heterosexual relationships, meanwhile, the age of consent throughout that entire period was sixteen. Consequently, Sherlock's relationship with Jacob, which John calculates took place in 1993, was illegal at the time, though it would not have been if one of them were a women, and would not be if it were happening at the time the fic is set. These discrepancies muddy the waters around choice and the nature of Sherlock's relationship: was it predatory, because he was under the age of

consent, or was it simply a normal relationship, because the age of consent was unfairly high due to homophobia?

Sherlock adheres defensively to the latter interpretation, protesting that John looks as though Sherlock has just confessed "some sort of—tragic childhood sexual trauma" instead of "a desperately horny teenager finally, *finally* getting a leg over" (309). John tries to cut through the complications by pointing out that whatever the age of consent was, it seems clear that Jacob made Sherlock unhappy. He says that even if he doesn't think Sherlock's sexual habits are pathological rather than freely chosen, he can't help being unhappy about a man who hurt Sherlock. But even this isn't acceptable to Sherlock: he says his happiness isn't the point. John says it is part of the point for him—though he's sorry about that, since it isn't what Sherlock wants him to feel.

Choice is complicated for John here, too: he wants to respect Sherlock's interpretation of his own life, but he cannot simply choose not to be worried about him. Here, too, choice is hampered by both personal and cultural factors. Although John understands the complicated nature of the age of consent, he also sees in Sherlock's relationship with Jacob the outline of a typical abusive underage relationship: a power imbalance, an isolation of the younger partner from their family, the use of care as manipulation. Jacob was a postgraduate and a student of Sherlock's grandmother; he started his relationship with Sherlock when Sherlock was isolated and miserable. At one point, he convinced Sherlock to skip his A-levels and run away from school. John has a very hard time accepting that there was no power imbalance there, calling Jacob a man "a decade older than you irresponsible enough to start shagging a boy under the age of

consent" (309). John knows the law was unjust and homophobic, but, as he explains later to his therapist, he still thinks it matters that Sherlock was under the age of consent because Jacob was "a part of the group of people who ought to've been *protecting* Sherlock" (440). The law exists, he says, because adults shouldn't get to choose on their own what's okay and what isn't, and it doesn't seem right that Jacob did so in this occasion: "that rape, that oh, just a *little* bit of rape, *that* didn't matter, not in this particular instance" (440). He tells his therapist directly that he thinks Sherlock was abused (434).

It takes him a very long time to come to this conclusion; his session with his therapist takes place in the second-to-last chapter of what has so far been posted of this very long fic. His progress towards this admission takes the same structure as their sexual encounters: it unfolds very slowly, in ebbs and flows, and does not settle on some final certainty or singular moment of crisis. Although the fic ends with John in this mindset, it is still, in theory, a work-in-progress: John's conclusion that Sherlock was abused is not, in fact, meant as the last word on the subject. Were the fic to continue, it is possible his opinions would evolve and change, turn back on themselves and then reappear, gain more nuance and painful complexity. In fact, even during this therapy session, he is at odds with himself about how to read the relationship. He hates how it sounds, saying "Christ, every part of it, it makes me sick, the idea—Sherlock was, he was a late bloomer, too […] He [Sherlock] thinks it was—all right, for a man of nearly thirty to be illicitly shagging him when he'd just done his GCSEs and he probably still looked entirely like a child" (435). Yet he simultaneously resists this interpretation, because he wants Sherlock

to have the agency to choose how he sees his own past: “That’s his choice, isn’t it? To know—to understand what happened in his own bloody life” (439).

Sherlock insists that, far from being abusive, Jacob “saved my life” (391). He felt like school was torture and wasn’t sure he could endure another year; John later translates this, presumably accurately, as an admission that he was suicidal. And Jacob saw in him something different than merely the high expectations everyone else had for him because of his intellect and impressive family, which was enough to change Sherlock’s life for the better. John says to Sherlock, though he feels “heavy” and “hollow” and “battered,” that if Jacob really did save Sherlock’s life, then John is happy Sherlock met him (392). He tries, very hard, to see things how Sherlock is choosing to see them, to respect Sherlock’s narrative of his life. Yet later on, he frames it very differently to his therapist: “I think this arsehole was just about the only adult in his life who gave him any kind of sustained, positive attention, but that’s the playbook, isn’t it?” (435). Even then, though, he feels “weirdly defensive” (439), saying it is “so hard to explain *correctly*” (434).

Despite John’s conflicted feelings and his desire to honor Sherlock’s insistence that he had agency as a teenager, he can’t help connecting Sherlock’s refusal to have an orgasm with his relationship with Jacob. He doesn’t want to say it to Sherlock, knowing that Sherlock insists his sexual preference isn’t pathological, but he can’t seem to help it: “‘If it's been—,’ John is saying: thinking *no no you blundering cockheaded arsehole* while his tongue trips and fumbles, ‘twenty years ago, you would've been—’” (390). He is actively trying to stop himself from suggesting the link between Jacob and the refusal to orgasm, but here again choice is hampered by emotion. Sherlock asks if he thinks

Jacob broke him. John, very carefully, tries to articulate what he thinks without suggesting Sherlock is guided by trauma or a lack of agency. He emphasizes choice: "I think you have, since then, made choices […] That I don't understand," and that those choices hurt Sherlock (392). He thinks those choices hurt Sherlock.

> "'And *that's* what feels broken, to me […] Not—not *you*, but that—this one thing that—that sometimes you do that seems like it hurts you and that seems—logically speaking, a fucking—*natural deduction*, that it might have something to do.' Forcing his hand down flat. 'With what happened,' he says, 'with Jacob': breathing. 'When you were.' In: out. 'Just a boy, and he. Wasn't.'
>
> "Sherlock is so still that John feels like he, in contrast, is wobbling: spinning, nearly.
>
> "'I don't—I know you don't want me to think it's pathological,' John says. Breathing: again, and again, and again. 'But I—I have to think about it somehow, because I—I don't know what actually—happened, so I can't do anything but connect the fucking dots.'" (392)

He guesses, correctly, that Jacob was Sherlock's first lover and that he hasn't had an orgasm since he was with Jacob,

> "'and please, by all means, if any of this is is wrong then *correct me* but it looks like—,' aching; '—like you give yourself up over and over to what I want, to what—your lovers want, what they *have wanted*, for—for your entire adult life, but you don't do—you don't *know how* to do the things

> that you want for *yourself*, and you must've learned that somewhere, and it makes you so fucking unhappy.'" (392)

John articulates what seems, as he defensively puts it in Sherlock's own professional language, like a "natural deduction": that since Sherlock hasn't had an orgasm since he was with Jacob, and since he has since been unable to prioritize his own sexual desires over his lovers', that his denial of his own pleasure—which includes orgasm—is most likely caused by what happened back then. John, in the above passages, tries extremely hard to simply say what it looks like from his perspective, and to give Sherlock a chance to correct him; he is merely "connecting the dots" from the information Sherlock has given him. He is "wobbly: spinning, nearly," and making himself breathe "again, and again, and again"; this conversation shares some of the same intensity, language, and physicality of their sexual encounters, which suggests that the structure of edging is in place during their conversations about sex as well as during the sex itself.

This sort of conversational edging also allows them to hold contradictory interpretations and beliefs at the same time. Sherlock rejects John's assumptions about his relationship with Jacob, saying,

> "I didn't learn it […] he didn't teach me that I—shouldn't get off, or that I shouldn't get what I want, or that I had to— […] It was a choice […] It was—it was a choice that I made, that I *am making*, I spent—a year and a half, two nearly, being a perfectly normal boy—well, for some definitions of normal I suppose—with a perfectly normal if somewhat older boyfriend, whom I loved madly, who loved me, who was—*sweet* to me,

> who—who wrote me letters when I went back to school, who thought I—and then I. […] I grew up. […] And I wasn't—I wasn't the same p-person. The boy I had been with Jacob. And I needed […] something—else. […] So I chose it. […] I chose to live like this."

It is of the utmost importance to Sherlock that however thorny his desires, however much pain or unhappiness his sexual attitudes and experience cause him, he has chosen them. The assertion that one may freely choose pain or discomfort is, of course, central to some kinds of kinky sex, in particular those association with BDSM. Indeed, it is central to the practice of edging. Yet Sherlock's pain and discomfort go beyond the sexual; he appears to be "choosing" unhappiness. Even if John takes Sherlock at his word that he is operating entirely freely of the constraining effects of trauma or abuse, Sherlock's choice to be unhappy is an extremely difficult one for John to swallow. Edging, though useful in facilitating their sexual experiences in a way that reduces harm and allows for experimentation, does not prevent all harm. However, the ability to accommodate failure—to make missteps, miscommunications, and even mutual hurt temporary obstacles rather than reasons to permanently stop their relationship—is another of the affordances of edging.

4. "A lot of the time I don't know how to enjoy it": Edging and Failure

Sherlock's sexual peculiarities and attitudes, whether engendered by sexual trauma or chosen freely (or both), result in a number of encounters that may be describes as, more or less, failures. In particular, as the story goes on, it slowly becomes evident that Sherlock may be engaging in—or even initiating—sexual acts he doesn't really want.

This suggestion unfolds itself very gradually, and is only stated directly in the last quarter of the fic—and only stated in its stark entirety in the so-far second-to-last-chapter, when John says to his therapist, "there's what *I* want, and there's what he'll *agree* to, but I don't think he knows what he wants, really, because he's too busy thinking about what *I* want" (439). Early in their sexual encounters, for example, Sherlock eagerly latches onto those of John's sexual fantasies that involve him dominating and sometimes hurting John. About a third of the way through the fic, there is a scene in which they roleplay with Sherlock as a teacher caning John as a schoolboy. At this point in the fic, John lets Sherlock take the lead, assuming that this is something he wants as well. Gradually, however, John begins to suspect that Sherlock wants kissing and tenderness, but finds asking for it extremely difficult.

Sherlock's tendency to push for roughness he doesn't really want becomes especially evident in the middle of the previously-described mascara bath scene that transitions into the lingerie/schoolgirl fantasy scene. They are sitting pressed together and the moment is sweet and soft: "With his arms around Sherlock's warm body he could believe that they were the both of them together in fact glowing: a warm-rushing swollen welling-up against-under John's skin" (336). John thinks, over and over again, "*I want to make you happy,*" and asks Sherlock to tell him how (336).

Then things go wrong. Sherlock starts telling John to fuck him hard with his fingers, raw, fast, without lube. John feels "helpless," "almost sick," and tries to go slowly and carefully even as Sherlock begs him to "just shove them into me, *please*—" (337). He is caught between what Sherlock is asking for and what he knows Sherlock wants. He

wants, badly, to go slowly, gently,"Even if Sherlock is panting hard-hot-hard writhing above-against him and whispering, 'Now, do it—now, do it hard,' even while John is nodding helpless knowing—*wrong*" (337). He can tell that "Sherlock is terrified, he's *terrified*; terrifying, too huge to think, as John wraps his arms around Sherlock's warm trembling body and kisses him, over and over and over again, as deep as he can" (337). He says he doesn't want it to hurt, "*Knowing that you don't want me to*, John is thinking; but he can't say that" (338). He knows that Sherlock is unable to admit he wants it slow and sweet, but that he is likely to shut down entirely if John points this out. Here is where the problem of choice and consent become starkly clear: Sherlock is, theoretically, choosing rough, painful, fast sex; he is not only giving John consent to fuck him that way, but outright begging him for it. And yet John knows he does not want it. He is, John thinks, "forc[ing] himself along": a strange kind of scenario, in which Sherlock is making himself do things counter to his own desires (338). John pleads with him to let him be gentle. He says, "I want to give you what you want […] but I can't—*hurt* you, not—not for *real*" (339). The meaning of the second use of the word "want" is nearly impossible to pin down in this sentence: "I want to give you what you want" means both "I want to do what you are telling me to do"—because John knows it is important to Sherlock to be treated as if he has full agency to make his own choices—and "I want to do what would actually feel good to us both," which is the opposite of what Sherlock is saying he desires. Meanwhile, the first "want," John's want, articulates two mutually exclusive desires: wanting to honor Sherlock's needs regarding his sense of agency, and wanting to do what John knows Sherlock actually desires in terms of physical intimacy.

The word "want" continues to recur as the scene unfolds, its repetition driving home both the problematic nature of desire and the sometimes incompatible relationship between choice and desire. When Sherlock abruptly begins to fuck John, giving him "a hard mechanical pounding," John knows, with "absolute, blinding certainty, that this is not what either of them wants" (339-340). John stops him. He says, "I want to kiss you" (340). He asks, "Do you want to do this?" and says, "I don't want you to do this, I don't think *you* want to do this" (340). Sherlock cannot answer directly. He says John was going to put his fingers up him; John says, "I'd like that […] if you want me to (341). Sherlock says, "I want you to […] I want—I want you to feel me up all over, I want—I want—*fingerprints*, I want—" (341). John, perhaps realizing that "want" has become an impossible-to-parse term, finally frames it differently: he asks Sherlock if he likes it. Sherlock can't quite answer this question either, but he does a better job than when wanting is the key term. He says, "A lot of the time I don't know how to enjoy it" (342). He recognizes that pleasure and desire are not always aligned.

But he reintroduces choice to the mix, too, saying, "Will you do it with me anyway?" (342). He may not find something pleasurable, but he is asking John to do it regardless. John, again committed to honoring Sherlock's sense of agency, says, "I'll do anything you ask me to," though he feels "half-sick" (341). But he also, finally, puts into words the perilousness of the gaps between pleasure, desire, and choice: "I worry, with sex, […] that sometimes you're just—just asking me to do things because you think I want them, even if—even if you hate them, or they make you feel bad […] I don't want you to hate it […] I don't want you to feel bad" (342). He says it feels different when Sherlock really

wants to do something and when he doesn't: even though Sherlock says he likes "being inside" John, there are times when he wants it and times when he doesn't (342). Just now, he says, "you *didn't* want to, yeah?" (342). Again, however, the word "want" is not that simple: Sherlock replies, "I wanted to, and I didn't want to" (342).

Sherlock tries to articulate the complexity of his experience: "'I'm not unhappy,' Sherlock whispers. 'It doesn't—it doesn't make me unhappy, not—not.' Hoarse: 'Quite'" (344). He says it confuses him.

> "'I want,' Sherlock says, 'I want to be—*close* to you,' unsteady. A little too fast, 'I want it—so badly I can't—' tripping he stumbles: 'but I don't,' over his clumsy tongue; 'but half the time I don't know how to—I don't know what to do even while I'm—thinking a thousand things an instant and—and panicking, nearly, while you—' and helpless John is pulling him tighter tighter tighter while faster and faster he is saying '—you pet me like—and you kiss me,' Sherlock is gasping, 'and you let me, *why* do you let me, you don't have to and I—I don't know I don't know how to, I don't—what you want but I try to—'" (344).

Sherlock's insistence that he is always making an active choice regarding his sex life is undermined by this halting, jerky attempt at articulating the disjunction between what Sherlock desires and what actually happens in Sherlock's brain and body when he and John are sexually intimate. He can't stop his racing thoughts, however much he wants to. He is both confused and stuck, repeating some variation of "I don't" six times in the above excerpt: he doesn't know how, or why, or what to do. He can't even clearly

articulate what it is he doesn't know, as is evidenced by the syntactically garbled "I—I don't know I don't know how to, I don't—". The repeated negative phrase "I don't" suggests, if not quite an inability to choose how he responds to sexual activity (as "I can't" would), certainly an ongoing pattern of not controlling his reactions.

Sherlock tries to argue that despite this lack of control over his reactions to sex, he should still be able to do it. He evokes desire again: "I *want* to enjoy it" (345). He also says that the sex feels good, and sometimes it's comforting. He asks John, who has just told him that he doesn't want to sleep with Sherlock if it means he's hurting him, if those things—wanting to enjoy it, physical pleasure (which is not wholly synonymous with enjoyment), and intermittent comfort—are "enough" (345). John says they are enough if Sherlock tells him they are enough, but he also invokes the complexity of his own wants, needs, and preferences: "'I could live without kissing you,' John says, as steadily as he can. He could do. 'I don't want to,' he says, 'but I could.' But he would" (345). It is *possible* not to kiss Sherlock ("I could"), he *will* stop kissing Sherlock if required ("he would"), despite his *desire* not to stop ("I don't want to"). However, "'I can't live with wondering how I'm hurting you because you won't tell me, Sherlock. I *can't*'" (345). It is possible to go against his own desire (kissing Sherlock), but it is not possible for him to hurt Sherlock. Not hurting Sherlock goes beyond desire; it is an impossibility so total it is italicized ("I *can't*").

Sherlock comes back with the same problem as before, however; he doesn't always know what he wants, so he doesn't know what will hurt him. He asks what to do if he doesn't know what he wants, and John says to tell him. Sherlock says, "And then

you'll stop" (346). Honoring the pattern they have established through the ebbs and flows of an edging-based sexual practice, John counters with, "And then we'll play it by ear" (346).

Sherlock says that the parts of him that are unsure don't always talk to him (351). John says that he'll check in. Sherlock says, "This seems like a frustrating and fairly pointless exercise […] if precisely neither of us is certain what either of us wants" (351). But John says it's better than "fumbling around at random and not knowing if that was—right, or. Good, or bad, or—or *boring*, but still just barging ahead based on […] Whatever. Wrongheaded or half-complete notion we've got into our heads" without anyway to tell "whether or not we've—or *what* we've got wrong" (352).

For John, it is more important to surface the complexity, contradictions, and uncertainty inherent in what he and Sherlock desire than to simply ignore them and barge ahead. At this point, the conversation shifts into the next phase of their sexual encounter, in which they try to do what John has suggested. At first, it seems to work; when Sherlock says he wants John to put the stockings on him, John can tell he's embarrassed, but not afraid (356). Then they transition directly into the lingerie and schoolgirl fantasy described earlier in this chapter. The earnest, intense emotional intimacy John experiences as he tries to imagine a different past for Sherlock, one in which a caring version of his younger self is there with Sherlock, seems to be shared with Sherlock. He is turned on and wanting, and Sherlock makes every verbal and physical indication that he is too. As described above, however, it abruptly goes wrong when Sherlock almost comes and instead has a panic attack.

John is slammed with guilt and anxiety about the fact that his strategy for working with Sherlock's uncertain and contradictory desires has failed them so badly in this moment. He comes back to the question of wanting, and pleasure, and choice, trying to identify where things went wrong. He considers different points during their sexual encounter, wondering if he should have stopped at any of those moments, but he

> "can't answer, he *can't*; Sherlock wanted it and didn't want it and he let John burrow into him and asked John to trust him, to touch him, to lick his nipples and put something up him, he fucking *begged*; but he still froze when John touched his hair, after. He still sobbed, for hours, in John's bed. John couldn't've done it any different, he doesn't think—
>
> "—could he?" (388)

The word "can't" reappears here as a kind of limit. John wonders if it was literally impossible for him to make different choices throughout the encounter. But the insistence of the early "he *can't*" weakens in the last sentence of this reflection: first, there is the declarative statement that John "couldn't have done it any different," but this is immediately weakened by the tacked-on qualifier "he doesn't think." Then there is an em dash that cuts off not only the thought but the paragraph itself, inserting a visual and aural pause into the reflection that dramatically undermines John's assertion. The paragraph break and the second em dash at the start of the next paragraph "he doesn't think—" and "—could he?" give weight to the suggestion that maybe it had been possible for John to do things differently. It is a new, terrible thought, not simply a rhetorical question (i.e. surely he couldn't, right?) but a real inquiry: "—could he?"

This crisis throws the men's entire sexual relationship so far into a starkly different light, and threatens its continued existence. John tries to use the structure of edging, which so far has allowed them to pause, reflect, and keep going after difficult encounters, to reflect on why that particular experience failed so badly. He asks if Sherlock can tell him what happened before the panic attack. Sherlock, however, resists too much reflection. He says John didn't hurt him, "But it wasn't—good, for me" (388). This is something different from wanting or from pleasure: he says sharply, "I don't mean I didn't enjoy it" (389). He says, "I shouldn't do that again, that's all" (389). He says he isn't breaking up with John, just that "I've let it get too far, I can't go that far, I can't […] I can't like it that much" (389).

The word "shouldn't" occurs here, coloring the repeated use of "can't" in the next sentence. Obviously Sherlock *can* like it that much, if can indicates simply what is possible, because he did in fact like it that much and implies that in the future he could again. "Can't" takes on the meaning of "I must not, I should not." Should/shouldn't is not a term that appears nearly as frequently as can/can't, will/won't, or want/don't want, and its use here threatens the ethos of edging. It does not make space for discovery, reflection, or careful navigation of the borders of possibility. If Sherlock literally *could not* do it again—if it were literally impossible—that would actually make room for change and development; what he can and cannot do have shifted often throughout the story. But *shouldn't* simply cuts off all future experiments.

Indeed, after this, Sherlock becomes emotionally cut off from John and shies away from John's attempts to touch him gently and tenderly. However, he continues to initiate

sex: he also aggressively comes onto John, fucking him intensely and insisting he wants it. Without the ebb-and-flow, time-stretched structure of edging, the sex is fast, emotionless, and unhappy. John knows Sherlock has been "in a state of more or less continual terror and panic" since his panic attack, and "every time they're within fifteen feet of each other it seems to bring a new part of Sherlock that is off-limits to John" (426). Yet John doesn't know how to stop it, because he still wants to honor Sherlock's insistence that he can choose what to do with his body. Additionally, it seems like Sherlock will respond as if John is confirming his brokenness or undesirability if he says no: "If Sherlock turns up tonight aiming for another frantic, joyless shag, should John *reject* him? He has the sick, sinking suspicious that he *ought* to, but Sherlock so clearly expects it, every moment: John doesn't know how he *can*" (426). John is caught between Sherlock's insistent choice to have sex with him and his obvious lack of pleasure in it, his wanting to sleep with John and his not wanting to sleep with John. Whereas before, there were times when Sherlock seemed to genuinely want John to do something he wasn't entirely sure he'd like, it seems now that the gaps between wanting, pleasure, and choice have gotten sharp and painful, empty of the intimacy and self-discovery they at times were able to hold.

The inability to have a straightforward discussion with Sherlock reaches its breaking point. Finally, John is at a point where he knows "Sherlock isn't all right":

> "Sherlock isn't all right, and he won't be all right, and he *wasn't* all right, he hasn't really been all right for twenty fucking years, has he? But John can't say that to him, isn't *allowed* to say that to him, wouldn't be *able* to

> say that to him; because not one word of it would fucking help. Over and over Sherlock will insist he is all right over and over and so they just—trundle along, don't they." (425)

He explains to his therapist that Sherlock is"extremely messed up […] about sex" (437). He says that "Half the time I can't tell if he's enjoying it" or if it's "more like a compulsion" […] "to please me" (438). He says he doesn't think Sherlock is using John to "self-harm," that it is more like "distraction" (438).

John is afraid of not loving Sherlock correctly; he says he doesn't know how to: "every little scrap he gives me just means I know better how badly I'm cocking everything up, not—not how to fix it" (443)."he doesn't tell me, he *can't* tell me, I *know* he can't, he can't—every part of him locks up when he tries to talk about what—what he actually—" (441). An em dash again: John cannot finish the sentence, probably because he understands by now that its natural end, the word "want," has become impossibly hard to parse. He is terrified that he is "selfish" (435). He explains what happened with the lingerie/teenage girl fantasy sex: "I'm afraid I—I did, I did something I thought he wanted I—I thought I could tell that—that he wanted it and I thought he enjoyed it and then he—he had a sodding breakdown, all right? he—I *knew* he was a bit of a mess and I *knew* that he'd never be able to say if he wanted it and so I sodding *pushed* him, didn't I" (444). He is terrified that he is hurting Sherlock in the same way he believes Jacob did.

This is, however, not necessarily accurate; it is what John feels in this moment, but since the fic is unfinished, there is still time for him to interpret things differently. The therapy session is similar to the moments of near-climax in John and Sherlock's sex: it is

a peak, a crisis, a revelation—but not an end. John does not have to remain trapped in the excruciating moment of not knowing how to love Sherlock without hurting him. There is still time—potentially, since the fic may never be finished, an endless amount of time—to readjust and reinterpret.

In fact, he moves towards this adjustment as the fic approaches the last posted chapter. John tells his therapist that despite his fears that he is hurting Sherlock, he is still terribly in love with him and doesn't know how to handle having sex without their former intimacy. His therapist asks what John really wants from Sherlock; John says he wants to kiss him. But he can't ask, because Sherlock is so bad at saying no to him. His therapist says, "You need to let him let himself be intimate with you"; he suggests that perhaps Sherlock doesn't know John needs him to kiss him (447).

This prompts another crisis moment within the ebb-and-flow pattern of edging. The final scene of the fic so far is a conversation between John and Sherlock about how things have to change, or they have to stop having sex. It mirrors the structure of their sexual encounters in that it brings them close to completion: if the conversation fails, the story ends. John makes this clear, saying, "it can't feel this unequal, it can't feel this *unfair*, I can't feel—I can't feel all the time like what I want is. *Wrong*, I don't, I don't want to p-push you, I *hate* that I push you, but I can't do it like *this*, either, I *need* you, I feel—all the time like I need every sodding part of you and I, I don't man to, I know you can't—" (451). Sherlock tries to kiss him, to escalate things sexually, and John refuses, saying they have to have a conversation. He says, "I don't want to force you, it'll—*kill* me, to feel like we're doing things you don't want" (451). He also says he is miserable and

lonely; “it’ll kill me, Sherlock, if you stop being my partner again” (452). He says if they’re sleeping together, he needs Sherlock to kiss him, and he can’t fuck him without it meaning anything. Sherlock says, “Half the time I wish you’d make me” (452). John says he can’t; Sherlock replies that he knows, but at least he “can see how that *works*” (453).

It would be easier, Sherlock admits for once, to not have to choose. Choice is a burden: it requires endless energy and self-reflection. This admission suggests that Sherlock’s stubborn insistence that he is and was in control of his past and present sexual choices is exhausting to maintain. It also reveals the toll Sherlock’s uncertainty around desire takes on him. Not knowing what he wants—or, indeed, how to sort through all the different kinds of wanting and not wanting—frustrates him. This, perhaps, is why he pushes John to do things that don’t feel entirely good to him. At the same time, it shows what a vital role edging has played in preventing Sherlock from being able to push too far: John always stops, slows things down, checks in, because Sherlock is not supposed to come.

This structure allows them to reach this moment, in which John repeatedly stops Sherlock from escalating into physical intimacy so they can have a direct conversation about what both of them want. While wanting is problematized as in their prior encounters, they do manage to be a bit clearer, a bit more direct with each other; the ebb and flow of edging allows for ideas to expand and change and progress, if not on an entirely straightforward path. Here, Sherlock attempts to sidestep the complexity of the word “want,” not so much denying its impossible multiplicity as using it repeatedly in such a way as to communicate that there is, nonetheless, some aspect of it that is

consistent and stable: he does want John wholly and fully, despite the fact that, paradoxically, there are also specific things he does not or cannot desire from him. He says:

> "I want you to kiss me […] I—I want to kiss you and I want to go to bed with you, I want to take you apart and I want you to do it to me, I want to spend time with you when I don't want to spend time with—with anyone, really, and I want you to belong to me, which you can't, and I know it, and I've spent rather a lot of time wanting to tear apart everyone who ever touched you when you were supposed to be mine, slowly, and with considerable violence, so I think you can understand why I—I can't trust it, John, because that—that's the moment I'm the closest to them, isn't it? so of course I don't trust it, what—what I want from you, what I, I've *always* wanted from you, because I want everything from you, I want—I want things from you I haven't got words for, I want—every single fucking part of you you can give and rather a lot of things I sincerely hope you wouldn't, so if I've ever made you feel like there was a micrometer of me I wasn't gagging to give up to you, it was a lie and I regret it […] For—that part of it, at least." (453)

The word "want" has hitherto been splintered into multiple meanings and connotations: what feels good, what Sherlock is giving consent to despite it not feeling good, what Sherlock wants to want even though he doesn't want it, what Sherlock wants to want even though he isn't sure he can want it, what he wants to give John, and so on. But

Sherlock tries hard, here, to pin it down at least "for that part of it": he wants "everything" from John, "every single fucking part of you," beyond what is safe or responsible. In previous scenes, the repetition of the word want has served to emphasize its overwhelming complexity, but here, its repetition is an attempt to make it mean what Sherlock wants it to mean. Significantly, this is possible largely because Sherlock is not operating primarily within the realm of the sexual: he is not saying what he wants in terms of sex, but what he wants on a larger, more metaphysical scale.

Perhaps that is why, when Sherlock returns to the question of physical intimacy, he changes the key term: he shifts from "want" to "need." He asks John, "What do you need for me to put my mouth on you?" (453). This can be read as a strategy to sidestep the problematic nature of "want": even as he makes clear that some forms of his desire are knowable and consistent, he recognizes that wanting may not be sufficient to guide them through this relationship. At first, John parries the question, telling Sherlock he doesn't have to put his mouth on him. Again, the language of desire is replaced by that of need: he doesn't *have* to do this. Sherlock, rather than saying he wants to, asks if he can.

John replies, "If you let me kiss you first […] and don't let me come" (454). And this is the final line posted since 2019: a reversal of the basic premise of the fic, the stipulation that started it all. Although it is a kind of ending, it is not really the ending: there are, supposedly, more chapters to come; additionally, it takes readers right back to the beginning of the fic, but this time with the insights they have gained throughout it. John returns to and reaffirms the usefulness of edging, reestablishing it as a strategy to guide them through future encounters instead of simply putting an end to those

encounters. He recognizes its potential for working through difficulties and for coping with repeated failures, misfires, and miscommunication. He also recognizes its potential to facilitate pleasure and intimacy in the face of overwhelming obstacles.

The fic ends here, but it doesn't really. There is more to come, even if it might never come. And, though greywash is nearly 260,000 words into this as-yet-unfinished fic and theoretically, someday, there are at least eighteen more chapters to be posted, the narration describes the atmosphere in which this scene occurs in terms not of wrapping up but of starting out, or perhaps starting out again: "It's still light out. Early, really. The peculiarities of summer in London: the sullen low-skied pale days that can last for untold weeks" (453). It is still early; there is still time.

Coda: Edging as a Political Model

My overall aim in "Reading for a Queer Sexual Ethics: Victorian and Contemporary Modes of Intimacy" is to consider specific sexual practices, as described within written texts, as potential models for a way of engaging with difficulties around sex and sexuality—specifically, formal models that suggest how certain structures of intimacy and erotics might be used to navigate difficult sexual issues in a politically useful way that prevents harm as much as possible without falling into the simplistic, easily exploitable trap of purity politics. My first chapter sits with anal fingering as a mode, one that offers a respite from the demands of agential selfhood, yet remains reliant on the structure of psychological interiority on which it rests. My second examines a number of related practices, such as knifeplay and bondage, that I classify under the heading of "erotic submission." Texts involving these kinds of practices offer alternatives to fully

agential selfhood, though their accessibility is somewhat limited and they perhaps go too far in removing individualized needs and desires. This chapter offers up edging as a formal structure through which to engage in the difficult work of navigating erotic intimacy itself as well as constructing a robust queer politics around erotic intimacy. As depicted in "build your wings," edging is an incredibly capacious mode, a structure within which a tremendous amount of experimentation, much of it failed, may take place. The possibility of consummation, always on the horizon but never actually reached, binds the participants together in a continual attempt to discover the most pleasurable, most mutually satisfying relations—while, at the same time, always taking great care to maintain the basic promise of agreed-upon restraint, restraint which requires constant communication and the suspension of wholly uncareful, individualized pleasure. This mode bears a lot of resemblance to José Esteban Muñoz's vision of queerness as educated hope for a better future: "Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house…Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world" (Muñoz 1). Muñoz's utopianism insists on specific ideas about restructuring the future rather than relying on naive optimism; edging, I would argue, affords time and space to work through and towards that future.

So orgasm, like queerness or perfect politics, never quite arrives. Yet the endless scene of waiting, while maddening, frustrating, and difficult, is also dynamic and active and deeply relational. Some of the time it's even fun. Together, we hold each other back

from the fantasy that we will someday construct a sexual politics so perfect everyone will know forever how to prevent all harm, confusion, and heartbreak—but we also urge each other on, trying to get closer, trying out whatever might bring us a little nearer that completion. Not everything we try is good for everyone. Not everything works. But we don't break apart: there's still that intentionally stymied desire urging us on, to try again, to try more, to try harder—and maybe someday—not today, hold on, not just yet—maybe someday, we'll—

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Addendums

1. *Or Else* accessible through request of the author.
2. To access fanfiction related to this project, visit https://archiveofourown.org/users/lufairchild/pseuds/lufairchild.