

the offense for which she must beg forgiveness. Holbraad's rhetorical strategies help us accept the woman's response as both proper and comprehensible (204). We feel what indubitable truth *is*.

"Truth [is] the common-yet-different concern of diviners and intellectuals" (237). This is the key motivation for the work: to engage anthropology and Ifá over their different truth regimes. The core question of the book then is this: having seen Ifá's truth regime, do we think of anthropology's truth regime differently? The answer is yes. Anthropology's representationist truth is certainly parochialized as a truth originating in modern Europe. Perhaps even more to the point is the question, should we now learn to "do" anthropology's truth regime differently? Before we consider that, however, we must note that the book does not offer anything like an analogous presentation of anthropology's truth regime. The treatments are radically asymmetrical as stated:

At the outset of this book I made clear that the analogy between divination and anthropology (or intellectual work more generally) is due to the fact that both activities are centrally and explicitly concerned with truth. Much of the main body of the book has been devoted to corroborating and clarifying that claim with regard to divination, using the majesty of Ifá as the case in point. In devoting so much energy to just one side of the analogy however, I have taken the other for granted, as a matter of course. (241)

Holbraad's answer to the charge of asymmetry is also central to the book's accomplishment. As a delightful absurdity, this book uses, and thus adequately (if implicitly) reveals, the orthodox form of anthropology's truth regime to argue against anthropology's indexical truth and in favor of anthropology's cultivating a robust iconic form of truth. Such a truth would be formulated in certainty, not doubt, in much the manner that Ifá's truth is formulated.

What Holbraad proposes for anthropology is an Ifá-type truth—a form where the truth and its articulation are metaphysically one and the same; an Ifá-type truth in anthropological, that is, ethnographic, form. The question that needs to be asked now is whether, with such a refit, a robust anthropological truth will be able to claim a more prominent place in a world where, currently, the indubitable truths of the market dominate.

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Power and Its Alibis

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Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality. By Margot Weiss. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.

Techniques of Pleasure, an excellent interdisciplinary engagement between philosophical questions and ethnographic evidence, is a landmark study of the BDSM "scene" in San Francisco in which anthropologist Margot Weiss stages a critical intervention in a long-standing, unresolved debate in gender and sexuality studies over the politics of sadomasochism. Identifying an impasse between radical feminists who argue that BDSM replicates patriarchal violence and queer theorists who celebrate alternative sexualities as subversive departures from social norms, Weiss draws on participant-observation and interviews with practitioners of BDSM, pointing to ways in which, ultimately, neither position is empirically sustainable—establishing *Techniques* as a key text in an emerging ethnographic turn in the scholarship on sadomasochism.

The book opens with a vignette of a charity "slave" auction at the "Byzantine Bazaar," an event that marks Weiss's entrance into what she terms her "real" fieldwork, and figures rhetorically as an ethnographic origin story for the theoretical line of inquiry *Techniques* sustains. In this vignette, Weiss highlights two contrasting moments in—and readings of—the auction. First, there is the dominant white heterosexual man being sold as a bottom "for one night only." Weiss narrates the events unfolding as other participants encouraged the man to strip: "He faced us, blushing, while we took pleasure in his discomfort, shouting for him to remove the final barrier: his tightly whities. When he did, the crowd roared" (3). The next paragraph cuts to a white, male "Master," who brings to the stage his African American, female "slave." She writes: "he yanked up her dress to display her shaved genitals. . . . He said she was very submissive and guaranteed to make us happy. . . . I was uncomfortable during this scene, and I felt sure that the rest of the crowd was, too. I strained to read the woman's expression, to see if she was all right . . . but I couldn't tell" (4). This contrast between clear communication of parody and uncomfortable slippage between play and reality underpins the work's ambivalent tacking between replication and subversion as untenable alternatives.

Theoretically, Weiss grounds her analysis in what she terms "performative materialism," which "insists on a method of reading that pays careful attention to the dynamic ways subjects are produced in and through social power" (25). This interpretive approach, combining Foucauldian-Butlerian and Marxian interpretive frameworks, "neither ignores the materiality of discourse nor effaces the performativity of material inequality" (229). Weiss moves beyond positions that would render consensual sadomasochism as either exactly the "same" as the violence of torture, slavery, and rape or as entirely "bracketed" from the symbolic forms of power that sustain the erotic repertoire of BDSM from which such practices derive their

performative efficacy. Likewise, she takes aim at queer theorists who would celebrate these sexual minority practices as “outlaw,” drawing attention to the ways in which members of nonnormative erotic communities are “surprisingly ‘NORMAL’” (2)—embedded in the same systems of raced, gendered, and classed inequality as their “mainstream” counterparts. Throughout, Weiss navigates these oppositions adeptly, enabling readers to see the complexities and nuances of SM practitioners’ deep and ambivalent engagements with power as she critically engages her interlocutors—in the academy and, less conventionally, in the field. Letting no one off the hook, she argues that even seemingly and self-proclaimed “transgressive” expressions of subjectivity remain thoroughly embedded in social relations of inequality and power.

Conceptually, Weiss advances her examination of interconnections between techniques of power and those of pleasure using two central metaphors: the circuit and the alibi. “Circuits,” she writes, connect realms “often imagined as isolated and opposed . . . those conceptualized as subjective or private, and those understood as social or economic” (7). Such connections are often obscured by what she calls “alibis,” in which social forms of power are simultaneously drawn on and disavowed: “These disavowals use neoliberal rationalities of free choice, individual autonomy, and personal responsibility to obscure and sometimes reinforce forms of inequality. . . . When SM is seen as ‘just play,’ in other words, it can help obscure the dense circuitry between public and private, between oppressive social hierarchies and free, individualized desires” (19). Weiss takes her analytic project to be an ethnographic uncovering of the circuits that alibis obscure.

Demystifying alibis to reveal the hidden circuit is a move that underpins each of the book’s chapters, centering on insights about how neoliberal notions of choice help to obscure the consumerist, biopolitical, and disciplinary dimensions of BDSM practices. In chapter 1, the decline of the “old guard,” epitomized by spatial demarcation centering on Folsom and close-knit community, and the rise of the “new guard,” marked by territorial and social dispersion, through practices of mass mediation, commercialization, and gentrification, becomes an allegory for the ways in which queerness becomes commodified, rendering San Francisco a brand “used to attract affluent tourists and patrons while substantially undercutting social services and economic support for marginalized residents” (48). Chapter 2 centers on an extended discussion on “dungeon monitors,” who police the seemingly subversive space of play parties to ensure that all practitioners are playing according to the rules. Weiss highlights the ironies of how practices that predicate themselves on departures from social norms are themselves extensively regulated, showing how managing “risk” aligns with the very forms of power from which practitioners claim to depart. Chapter 3 takes up the ubiquity of toys, which figure as an essential sign of investment in and commitment to being a practitioner, as does taking and teaching classes to cultivate the technical skills essential to engaging in SM effectively and expertly. The cen-

trality of toys as commodified objects and education as consumption, standing in for money and time as signs of privilege, produces a reading of SM practices and practitioners as emblematic of late capitalism. In chapter 4, Weiss takes up the problem of the “bracket,” the way in which practitioners distinguish their play from violence, arguing that bracketing depends on liberal and neoliberal distinctions between public and private which, ultimately, can be separated only in fantasy insofar as desires are always already mediated by the social conditions in and through which they are produced.

The book concludes with a return to the image of the “Byzantine Bazaar,” this time in juxtaposition with the images of torture at Abu Ghraib, in which Lynndie England is cast in popular media as a “dominatrix.” Here, too, eroticism obscures structural inequality, but this time in reverse. Whereas the anxiety of slippage in the bazaar centers on the use of SM among practitioners as an alibi for reiterations of raced and gendered hierarchies, the Abu Ghraib examples operate in reverse. There, Weiss shows how the deployment of discourses of individual perversion works as an alibi for institutional, imperial powers. What differentiates the two, Weiss argues, is that “effective SM produces social relations through affective involvement; effective torture destroys them” (227); still, she writes, “replaying social norms in the privacy of our home or dungeon might obscure the systems of domination in and through which such scenes arise” (229).

Though this observation is theoretically astute, one should not stop there, and in this sense Weiss’s work, in displacing replication and subversion alike, constitutes an important turning point, pushing scholarship beyond an old paradigm, and simultaneously opening new analytic problems. For example, in a child custody dispute case analyzed by Marty Klein and Charles Moser, a mother, as a result of her participation in BDSM, was labeled as a victim of domestic violence, in disregard of expert testimony differentiating the two, with consequences for custody, alimony, and beyond (Klein and Moser 2006:240). While BDSM practices are produced in part through neoliberal forms of privilege, as such, BDSM practitioners, however advantaged by other positionalities like class, race, or gender, are stigmatized erotic minorities. The verdict in the custody case pushes the logic of alibi further than Weiss would: there, BDSM is literally “outlaw”; the court fails to see any difference at all between domestic abuse victim and BDSM practitioner. Thus, while the “bracket” of calling something play does not mean that it is detached entirely from the social framework in and through which the bracket is produced, neither can the bracket be dismissed altogether. Indeed, “bracketing” is important to BDSM practitioners, an integral part of the way they articulate and experience their cultural practices. What is needed, then, is a phenomenology of the bracket, to produce an understanding of the ways in which the limits of the alibi and thus the distinctions between, as in the custody case, BDSM and domestic violence, might be thought.

Two key terms that might help to begin the work of such

a phenomenology are “trust” and “ethics,” concepts central to two other very recently published ethnography-based studies of BDSM and its practitioners (Newmahr 2011; and Beckmann 2009, respectively). Putting such works into conversation, for example, by considering practitioners’ attention to and discussions of trust and ethics, might help locate the contours of “alibi” and thus work to account for the differentiated effects—performative and material—between a BDSM session and domestic abuse. If “consent” is not the panacea SM practitioners hope it to be, neither can it be dismissed entirely, especially in a social world where agency is questioned in ways that are reflective of social and structural inequalities. Weiss offers the limit case of “a submissive woman bound and gagged by a male master” (158), when assumptions of parody and reversal cannot so easily be made. Even in such instances—*especially* in such instances—a phenomenology of the bracket is of paramount importance.

Techniques of Pleasure is thus incredibly thought-provoking and profoundly and productively unsettling in its call for us to rethink fundamental assumptions about agency. Weiss succeeds admirably in producing a work that is conceptually rich and ethnographically engaging. This book will no doubt challenge and inspire future scholarship on BDSM specifically, and anthropologies of sexuality and neoliberalism generally, for decades to come.

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