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#consentsowhite: On the Erotics of Slave Play in "Slave Play"

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LIKE MANY NEW YORKERS, I have followed in the past few months the surge of responses to Jeremy O. Harris's celebrated *Slave Play*. As a psychoanalyst who works with trauma, and who treats individuals of various sexualities and of different racial backgrounds, I find it notable that, while fruitful conversations have been generated around racial identity and interracial relationships by the play, few commentaries take up the specific erotics of interracial desire or the play's implication that racism can carry an erotic charge. I am also interested in consent, by far the least attended to aspect of the play, which we encounter in the especially difficult

junction between sexuality and trauma. At this strained intersection, consent is revealed at its most impotent, impossible to help clearly adjudicate desire. For Harris, neither the white characters' "No" nor the black characters' "Yes" can be taken at face value. Both have ties to antebellum slavery and, thus, both have to be probed further, leading to the conclusion that the dominant discourse around sexual consent may itself be whitewashed and in need of revision.

Slave Play landed on the New York theater scene with a thunderclap. The first, fully sold-out run at New York Theatre Workshop in 2018 and the current staging at Broadway's Golden Theatre (October 6, 2019, to January 19, 2020) ignited a panegyric round of reviews, and a tide of celebratory appreciation for Jeremy O. Harris, the 30-year-old, gifted, queer, black playwright. Hailed as inaugurating a different conversation around contemporary race relations in the United States, the play has been called one of the best and most provocative new works on Broadway, praised for delivering "a shot across the bow of the Great White Way," and seen as taxing to the max white people's insecurities about race. Accurate though they may be, we should be cautious regarding such appraisals. It is one of whiteness's operations to understand everything as self-referential, yet this is not necessarily a play aiming to educate white people, but, rather, one intended to problematize collective living in the shadow of America's original sin, chattel slavery. In contrast to works of art that portray the history of chattel slavery in the past tense, *Slave Play* puts its audience on a collision course with how this history pulses through us *in the present*. Much of the commentary, thus, focuses on the play's insistence that white supremacy blasts gratingly in the everyday.

If some theatergoers get up and leave during the first act though, it is not because *Slave Play* holds whiteness to account (though, predictably, that kind of resentment has also been voiced). No, those who go to some length to broadcast their displeasure by gathering their belongings as if in slow motion before heading for the exit; those who comment on social media that they felt traumatized by the play/disrespected by Harris's depictions of black women; those who ragefully object that it trivializes the history of slavery; and those who initiated a petition demanding *Slave Play's* cancellation last year (themselves mostly black) are protesting something else. They are protesting the racialized stereotypes that drive the charged sexual scenes. These scenes seem to touch on something that still lingers in us, something disavowed and hard to pin down.

Unfolding on a Southern plantation, the opening act stuns the audience with three psychosexual encounters that involve vigorously simulated, on-stage sex. In the first, Kaneisha, a dark-skinned female slave, is subjected to a sexually tinged scene of racial denigration by Jim, the white plantation overseer. Their exchange darts back and forth between debasement and soft acts of irreverence, eventually culminating in Jim forcing himself on her sexually. In the second encounter, Alana, a dim-witted and comical Southern mistress, commands her handsome mixed-race slave, Philip, to play on "his little fiddle" some of that "mulatto magic" that makes the female slaves "hoot and holla ... waiting to run on ya later." Alana's specific intonation of the word "fiddle" implies that the real instrument of Philip's magic is his penis — a depersonalizing violence against black men that has a long history. Philip dutifully complies. Before long he is

face down on her bed, while she proceeds to forcibly sodomize him with a sizable black dildo, an heirloom from her mother. The third, and most complicated, sequence starts off with an inversion of the expected power dynamic in a queer couple: Gary, a black plantation overseer, orders around Dustin, the white-passing indentured servant. A few minutes into the scene, the two are physically tangled in sexual excitement having stripped each other down to their underwear. Dustin's already-thin servility quickly falls off as he threatens Gary, "[I c]ould have you lynched for deigning to touch me like that [...] You can talk to me anyway you please. But when it comes to touch [...] I am Dustin The White." From "lynching" to "calling the police" on "suspicious" black people, this scene unmistakably parallels the present, referencing just how easily white — and white passing — people can endanger black people's lives, whatever the relative positions of power either of them may otherwise occupy. Racial trauma and colorism pulsate through *Slave Play*'s first act under the heavy burden of history — to the garish, clamorous accompaniment of guttural sexual moans and heavy grunts. It's no wonder director Robert O'Hara decided to withhold an intermission; he anticipated that anyone made uncomfortable by the demanding horrors of the first act (that is, almost anyone with a pulse), would be tempted to walk away.

The combination of sex, trauma, and degradation played out through racial tropes is not an easy one to bear. But if you are coming to see a play that calls itself *Slave Play*, O'Hara explains, "it should cost [you] something to watch it and to experience it. [...] I don't think anyone should leave unscathed..." This echoes Harris's stage directions that no one should work to "make the audience comfortable." If the title *Slave Play* entices you to the Golden, you will not be allowed to squirm out of noticing your voyeurism or your vicarious identifications. Being called out for coming to watch would be discomfiting enough. Things become exponentially more so when we find out in the second act that what we have been watching so far was day four of a therapy dubbed "Antebellum Sexual Performance Therapy" (not a real term or practice — it shouldn't need to be said but, as a psychoanalyst, I'd better have). These sexual scenes, scripted and consented to in advance by all parties, intend to address the lack of sexual desire that affects the black partners.

The second act has an immediate retroactive effect on our understanding of the first act, leading us to reshuffle its meaning. The entire first act, we are now led to conclude, depicted fragments of sexual play where the protagonists were acting *as if* one were a master and *as if* the other were a slave. These power dynamics were enacted under the supervision of trained professionals (though the question of just how trained and how professional the second act's therapist, Teá and Patricia, are, is a laugh line on a loop in act two). To those familiar with kink communities, these scenes reference *race play*, a controversial and well-established sexual practice (see here, here, and here), though surely not everyone in the audience is aware of this citation. The this-was-scripted-and-part-of-therapy reassurance offered by the second act has a calming effect on the audience.

The transition from the first act's pornodrama to the second act's jargon-filled metalevel makes the audience feel relieved, and this further speaks to the

playwright's talent. By seemingly transposing the focus from the erotics of degradation to the troubling realities of white supremacy, *Slave Play* shifts from racist iconography to interrogating race relations. The implication that what occurred in the first act was a consensual, sexually inflected reenactment *of the past* permits Harris to move away from directly addressing the black partners' vexed desires. It is by means of this seductive sideways move that Harris accomplishes what he really intends to do: bring upon us the full force of *the present*, since the darker set of desires enacted in the sexual fantasy marks how the *then* is conducted into the *now*. To say it would be flat-footed to confuse the as-if quality of the slave play with reality misunderstands *Slave Play*'s central point: the play draws its sexual charge from the *fact* of these historical violences — from their very "materiality," as Teá and Patricia would say. It is on this very thin strip between past violations and present violations that the slave play in *Slave Play* ricochets.

One of the (less talked about) issues that *Slave Play*, therefore, confronts is the erotic life of racism. This, of course, is not really new news. One need only reflect on the sexual undercurrents subtending the history of lynching in America. It is precisely this not-me quality of rapturous racist desire, we might say, that enabled lynch mobs to virtuously participate in sexualized-crimes-turned-into-spectacles. The erotics of racism, *Slave Play* insists however, are not erotics of the past; they are, also, erotics of the present.

What the second act accomplishes, thus, is to show us how the "not-me" of desirous disavowal rhymes with the logics of white supremacy. Despite their protestations, we come to discover, the white and white-passing partners were not simply acting or "in role." Jim, Alana, and Dustin were sexually excited by the erotic scene, channeling racialized/racist feelings which they had been unwilling to avow — even as they also used it to distance themselves from their whiteness. As the audience, we are implicated in this dynamic too; "[n]o one has forced anyone to see a play called *Slave Play*" O'Hara points out, "[it's] your own interest, your own curiosity, other things bring you through the door." Being told "you, after all, came to watch" is a searing indictment to the audience. And with the back wall of the set a giant mirror, we are also watching ourselves watch, our faces reflected from the stage, implying we're all part of this slave play too, as much as we might prefer to think we're not. It is in this not-me vein of disavowal that Jim announces throughout the play that he did not at all find the roleplay arousing. Jim's repeated complaints that the whole process was "insane," "starting fires where there were none," and his protests about having been "made to call my wife a negress," make it easy to forget — and most do — that he has nevertheless sported a hard-on through some of the first act. This disavowal is, of course, also why Jim safewords, unable to fully participate in the erotic play. Similarly, Alana, whose humorous lines Harris uses to push us harder, announces that (play-)raping Philip "was just hot to me, really hot..." admitting that her character "unlocked some doors, let me tell ya." She and Jim differ in that Alana is willing to own her arousal; but even she denies that race was at play. Hence, her operatic outburst when Philip recalls that they met on fetlife ("like tinder for fetish fiends" as Jim explains), brought together by roleplaying a cucking fantasy where Alana's white husband, wanted to "get off watching a black man fucking his white wife." "[W]e weren't doing

ANYTHING like this," Alana wails, her histrionics escalating as she tries to draw a line between the fetlife roleplay and that of the therapy; the former, she insists, "had NOTHING to do with race, it was just what got *him* off [...] it had nothing to do with me." Last but not least, Dustin thoroughly enjoys his passionate entanglement with his "overseer," Gary. While the power dynamic seems inverted, it is, again, racial difference that potentiates his sexual abandon.

Still, *Slave Play* would be saying little that's new if sexual excitement was grafted only onto the white, and white-passing, characters. What remains controversial in act two is that the racialized erotic indignations that initiated the racial fetishization were solicited by the black partners. With few exceptions (see here and here), most commentary takes the out offered by the second act. And yet, the play's force resides in the fact that the solicited and volitional scenes of racial debasement mimic the atrocious history of chattel slavery *in the past* fueling spectacularly complicated intimacies *in the present*. This further presses the point that, in the context of antebellum history, past and present are neither in chronological order nor in linear relation, which is another way of saying that trauma scrambles psychic time. *Slave Play*, thus, offers not just incisive commentary on race relations but also an extended visitation, if not a vertiginous descent, into taboo and forbidden sexual appetites. Here are desires "capable of stressing nearly every boundary required for the order of 'civilized society' to hold." This is not to say that Kaneisha's desire to be called a "nasty negress" is universal to all, or even many, black women. *Slave Play* makes no such homogenizing move. That the desires portrayed do actually exist (here, here, and here) merely speaks to how these singular events draw on universal conditions.

Why would anyone voluntarily orchestrate a replay of their own trauma? This is a question that psychoanalysts have been reflecting on for over a century — and that those of us working therapeutically encounter regularly in our consulting rooms. Freud called this phenomenon repetition compulsion, and proposed that such acts are gnarled forms of memory that occur when traumatic events have been too overwhelming for the ego to process. Second-wave feminism struggled with a form of this question as well, heatedly debating in the 1980s desires that involved one's own *sexual* subjugation. Why would a lesbian, for instance, engage in a butch-femme relationship or participate in sexual sadomasochism when these dynamics, the argument went, draw on the inequality of gender roles mapped onto patriarchal cruelties? But, as Stallings pointed out, it took queer of color critique to ask what sorts of pleasures and what kinds of possibilities — personal, political, and otherwise — the scripting of sexually inflected traumatic repetitions might yield when it comes to bodies that have been historically oppressed and sexually exploited (here, here, and here). More than mere or idle, such repetitions, this work suggested, may constitute an attempt to graft agency onto histories over which one had no say. Still, this does not diminish how woefully shameful such desires may feel to those who experience them, even if shame, or traumatic antecedents, are not always a factor. Erotic desire visits us against our consent, indifferent to our politics, unconcerned with what's just or right. In the domain of the sexual, there is often a gap between what is fair libidinal game and what actually turns us on.

On these challenging matters, Harris is undeterred, turning the heat even higher. The black partners have not only requested these racial denigrations, they have been deeply and uniquely pleasured by them. Philip, who suffered from erectile dysfunction, was able to get an erection during the "forced" sodomy slave scene. When he says, "maybe that's why my dick worked more. Maybe my dick only works when I know I am black," the implication is that the form of "knowing" that swelled his arousal is his having been treated as if he were a slave. "I could see his eyes seeing me like a nigger," Philip says, reflecting on the cucking scene, to conclude: "Maybe my dick likes, LIKED, that I'd been finally been forced into some kind of space where it knew how it was being desired." Following Dustin's threat to have him lynched, Gary climbs atop a cotton cart and, towering over Dustin, orders him to get on his knees and lick his boot — which Dustin greedily does. This is how Gary, who hadn't come in months, reaches an astonishing orgasm that quickly mutates into a tearful, hyperventilating collapse. When Dustin later asks him if he hurt him in the way he wanted to be hurt, Gary is clear that he enjoyed the experience. The phrase "Gary came" is, in fact, repeated throughout act two, as if Harris wants to ensure we don't lose sight of the sexual play's yield. As for Kaneisha, much of the second and third acts revolve around her anger that Jim interrupted their sexual play just as she was about to climax (Harris's choice of "Starbucks" as the play's safeword deserves an essay unto itself). Jim could no longer abide the racially humiliating scenario that she wanted and, more precisely, needed.

By resituating the conversation in the sphere of racial identity, a matter absolutely urgent but perhaps more respectable and familiar, the second act permits us to sidestep the fact that the black partners sought sexual pleasures that "don't line up easily with the logic of recognition, equivalence and value." It is not difficult to see why this was a necessary tactic: it is painful, if not dangerous, to discuss a desire for sexual abjection, especially so in the charged territory of race. In this regard, *Slave Play* is as much about race as it is about using race as the proverbial Trojan horse through which charged, queer forms of desire are surreptitiously imported into dignified discursive spaces that would otherwise negate them. Here is queerness at its most complex, not as rooted in identity but as affect and as aesthetic, queerness as pertaining not only to lust or intimacy but also to sexual desiring that conducts shame, contempt, despair, and hate.

Throughout these intricate encounters, Harris is also working with the complications of consent. Slaves' consent was neither solicited nor relevant, which may mean that consent may not have equivalent meanings across racial categories and their histories. How meaningful of a concept can it be really when it comes to people who have been historically denied the prerogative of withholding it? This is a consequential question to ask because consent has so magnetized our culture that it is nowadays treated with near-hagiographic reverence. This seems to be increasingly the case in some BDSM communities as well, where such roleplay gets dramatized. In the #MeToo era especially, consent has overreached, promising to help navigate power differentials, to insulate against trauma, and to draft the conditions for satisfying sexual experience. But consent, as *Slave Play* illustrates, is not only concerned with the here-and-now. Despite our current fascination with it, consent may not be a

capacious enough concept to hold desire in the aftermath of trauma, it may be too unrefined when it comes to desires that have arisen through the very denial of personhood. So, while we are nowadays encouraged to take consent at face value, Harris prods us to see that neither the assent of the black partners' 'yes,' nor the refusal of Jim's 'no,' can be taken on their word. Sexuality, to be considered appropriate, Amber Musser writes, is expected to go "hand in hand with liberal subjectivity [...] [a]utonomy and agency are [...] integral" to it. But while for white people, autonomy and agency may be the hard-earned outcomes of projects of self-actualization, for black people, embarking on such projects involves having to first wrest autonomy and agency out of the hands of white supremacy, to gear up self-definitions that answer to one's own coordinates. Our current formulations of consent may, thus, be especially inapposite when it comes to the erotics of people whose freedoms were, and continue to be, curtailed. The consent models we are currently urged to adopt are, again in Musser's words, too predicated on "white fantasy" and, may, thus, be too whitewashed to help us.

It is against such whitewashing that Mollena Williams, a black woman who lives as a submissive in a 24/7 arrangement with a white man, says: "It's a struggle to say, 'This is genuinely who I am [...] [but to] say I can't play my personal psychodrama out just because I'm black, that's racist.'" The mingling of erotics and trauma is never easy and, in this case especially, one may be tempted to suspect a kind of estranged collusion with whiteness. But what Williams's words permit us to see is that such sexual possibilities may extend beyond a pure recycling of the past, that for some subjects agentic sexual desire may open up to something even as paradoxical as a scene of racist play (just like for some survivors of sexual abuse, agentic desire is refracted through staged scenes of intimate violation [here, here and here]). To a great degree, freedom and subjecthood pertain to being able to define oneself in one's own terms, which often pivots arounds acts of creativity — not only in acts of resistance — and, for various reasons, sexuality is a particularly suitable medium toward such creative acts. For black subjects, self-definition includes not conforming to white people's narratives about black subjectivity; understanding oneself despite white people's charitable and, thus, potentially condescending "concerns"about what's "really" agentic — especially since agency is differently drafted for subjects formed through histories of enslavement; and last, it also involves defining oneself without having to carry the burden of representing all black people, without succumbing, that is, to the pressures exerted on people of color to speak for their entire race.

However, re-articulating oneself and the terms of one's own agency can never be fully of one's own crafting, nor is it separable from history or past trauma. "Probably any sexuality," the queer theorist Eve Sedgwick writes, "is a matter of sorting, displacing, reassigning singleness or plurality, literality or figurativeness to a very limited number of signifiers... [to] a small repertoire of organs, orifices and bodily products." *Slave Play* stages one iteration of how sexuality can coagulate in relation to traumatic history. By repurposing history's iconographies in the service of pleasure, sexuality can reposition historical events that have otherwise had singular, static meanings. Harris dares to represent unusual forms of sexuality that graft pleasure onto power and

subjugation, desires that, for the most part, make themselves known in private bedrooms, BDSM dungeons and, speaking as a psychoanalyst, in therapists' offices. Efforts to wrest something new and of one's own creation out of something old and traumatic oftentimes give rise to desires that do not yield to the mandates of political correctness.

The play's third act shows us that engaging such complex dynamics can be a roaring success or an overwhelming failure, perhaps both at the same time. These dynamics, the not-rape rape scene of the third act suggests, are not easily worked out. Engaging these forces courts risk. These dynamics do not dissolve in our cultural holy grail of recognizing the other, of offering empathic witnessing of the other's trauma, or even of deep listening. The play ends with Kaneisha thanking Jim for listening to her. On the surface, she references his willingness to enact her wishes; more deeply, she thanks him for finally being willing to acknowledge his own racialized desire. Even so, the closing act offers no answers or resolutions, leaving us confused as to what we've watched, disturbed by the intensity of the affect, and unclear as to what happens next. This is an offering of great integrity that only art and real life can muster: trauma, bodies, power, and sex produce the inconsistencies and incoherencies of messy origins and uncertain futures.

I n her classic essay on the historical palimpsest of black female sexual exploitation that moves from slavery to the present, Hortense Spillers writes:

> Whether or not the captive female and/or her sexual oppressor derived "pleasure" from their seductions and couplings is not a question we can politely ask. Whether or not "pleasure" is possible at all under conditions that I would aver as non-freedom [...] has not been settled.

Harris knows that some of the matters his play brings up are too incandescent to approach head-on. To do so, he says in a recent interview, "is almost like punching you in the face. But if you laugh, [...] all of a sudden you've opened yourself up and are consenting to, like, more. [...] You want more of that, because it's so funny. [...] Your mouth gets wider and wider and wider, and then I just throw ideas down it." The notion that the opening of one's mouth constitutes implicit consent is tricky, and not only because concluding consent from bodily cues is, at best, unreliable. *Slave Play*'s jokes seduce the audience into lowering their defenses, which means that the jokes strewn through the first two acts exact from the audience a strange form of participation, working on us at the limits of our consent, pressing us into discomfort while also transfixing us through their aggression, an aggression which is also, specifically, sexual. The laughter the play exacts is part of its strategic approach, a way for Harris to engage the questions Spillers describes as impolite.

Slave Play hints at how, in the midst of the trauma of having a body entangled with ghastly histories, projects of emancipation may take unexpected paths. The idea that the woundedness of the flesh can recruit the spasms of desire to move a person through a traumatic past may feel counterintuitive. So, too, might the proposition that a desire for intimate subjugation may open up emancipatory possibilities. But the matter of how traumatized bodies can make bids to release

themselves from history is that urgent. It is in response to this urgency that Jeremy O. Harris offers us the open wound that is *Slave Play*.

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