

“Slavery in the Heart of Freedom: Race, Romance, and Religion
through the Lens of BDSM”

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Saturday, March 12, 2022, 6:30 p.m. (get on Zoom at 6)

[Slavery in the Heart of Freedom Lecture American Academy of
Religion.doc]

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I. Title Slide

Slavery in the Heart of Freedom:
Race, Romance, and Religion
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J. Lorand Matory, Duke University

Annual Conference of the Southeast Region of the American Academy of
Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature

12 March 2022

II. CHANGE SLIDE

III. Slide of my Vodou altar

My Vodou Altar

(Haitian Vodou)



IV. First things first.

V. [SHAKE TCHATCHA]

VI. Legba, ouve bayè pou mwen. I salute the lord of the crossroads, gates, and doorways. Open the gate for me.

VII. Could you all please unmute temporarily.

VIII. CHANGE SLIDE

Bilolo
 Bilolo Afoutayi
 Yiii Bila-bila!



- IX. I would like to ask you to join me in saluting the **rebel slave**
spirits of Vodou/—the Petwo—/who will preside over this
 lecture.
- X. My own Petwo spirits include Kafou (Lord of the Crossroads)
and Grann Mari Bossou (The Grandmother among the Bull
Spirits).
- XI. You are now in the presence of my Ezili Danto (the fiery dark
 Mother)—she is at the center—and on the right is my Rèn
Kongo, the Queen of Kongo, who is a spirit of divinatory
 wisdom.

XII. On the left is my Ogou, the lord of revolution and the master of my head. He is not a Petwo spirit, but he fought alongside them in the Haitian Revolution.

XIII. After I say Bilolo, would you please say “Bilolo Afoutayi.”

XIV. [Then I’ll say Iiii bilabila]

XV. [Crack the whip]

XVI. I dedicate this lecture to the revolutionary slaves, who are energized by the whip./ In turn, they empower the worshipers and our altars.

XVII. No less than the free citizen, the rebel slave has mixed feelings of his or her own that also speak to the dilemmas of the citizen today. //

XVIII. [PAUSE SLIDESHOW]

XIX. I am enormously grateful for the opportunity to address this joint meeting of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature, two of the largest academic societies in the world devoted to the study of religion.

XX. It is a particular honor—and, I think, will be particularly useful—to address my controversial intervention to the southeastern regional chapters of these organizations. Arguably, by virtue of its defeat, the South is the heartland of US American religiosity.

XXI. I thank Professors Matthew Goff and Joseph Hellweg for thinking of me and for the prodigious labor they have invested in assembling this rich in-gathering of top scholars with such diverse specialties and positionalities. I can't wait to you're your feedback. [Pause]

XXII. A **major** element of the African American experience is the effort to figure out the **ways of white folks**./ Although African Americans and white Americans tend to live, worship, and marry separately, the premise of this talk is that, like Africa and Europe themselves, we are **potent** symbols and players in each other's **spirituality, sexuality, and self-fashioning generally**.

XXIII. I have spent the past four decades researching, writing about, and practicing the religions that Africa gave to the circum-Atlantic world [flow]

XXIV. But my research over the past **10** years has turned toward the study of **white** people from an Afro-Atlantic **religious** perspective.

XXV. **That** project and perspective inform my last book,/ *The Fetish Revisited: Marx, Freud, and the Gods Black People Make*,/ as well as a 1,000-page (double-spaced) manuscript I finished last summer, called *Slavery in the Heart of Freedom: Race, Religion, and Romance through the Lens of BDSM*.

XXVI. I think the book is interesting at even that length,/ but,/ for the sake of **college classroom** sales, my publisher wants me to cut it by 40%. I am hoping that your learned **response** to this talk will give me some guidance.

XXVII. This latest book manuscript re-examines white US American politics, religion, and romance/ (including BDSM)// from the perspective of the Afro-Atlantic religions—namely, West

African Yoruba religion, Brazilian Candomble, Cuban Ocha and Palo, and, **especially**, Haitian Vodou. These are the specific religions that have shaped my perspective.

- IV. The manuscript also reexamines white US American politics, romance, and religion; the Afro-Atlantic religions; and religion in **general** through the lens of BDSM.
- V. The term BDSM derives from the initial letters of Bondage/Discipline, Dominance/submission, and Sado-masochism.
- VI. I think it was the **gods themselves** who brought me to my new and unexpected topic.
- VII. In 2015, I was invited to discuss the manuscript of my last book, *The Fetish Revisited: Marx, Freud, and the Gods Black People Make*, at the Ohio State University, in Columbus.
- VIII. That manuscript, like the 2018 book that emerged from it, concerned the symbolic use and **abuse** of African gods and of Black people encoded in the Marxist and Freudian metaphor of “fetishism.” In my view, Black gods and Black men are the

foundational fetishes of the post-Enlightenment republic. We are the chief anti-types of an otherwise inclusive citizenship and the chief symbolic repositories of the irrationality, inappropriate sexuality, and violence that the white bourgeois citizen has been urged to repress, hide, or define away in himself as a precondition of the right to self-governance and the right to make contracts.//

- IX. During the hours before the roundtable on the manuscript,/ my wife (Bunmi) and I took a walk up North High Street and came upon The Chamber,// which,/ on its business cards,/ describes itself as “Ohio’s Largest Fetish Store,”/ reminding me of a great oversight in the manuscript.
- X. I had **forgotten** about this **foremost** use of the term “fetish” in US American life.//
- XI. [READ THIS] Inside the Chamber, we met a female Dominatrix,/ or FemDom,/ named Queen Aletheia, who opined that **all** sex is **hierarchical--**

XII. a thought with a ring of truth but one that my feminist upbringing since the 1970s had led me to consider both empirically and morally wrong.//

XIII. Through a photo, Queen Aletheia introduced us to her Dutch slave/—a white man with a white-collar job. The sign in his hands read, “It’s nice to be a slave.”/

XIV. “His thing is **blackmail**,” explained Queen Aletheia.

A) He likes for her to command him to do humiliating things and threaten that, if he disobeys, she will reveal his shameful desires to his boss.

B) As a Black male myself, I could not simply focus on the plot of her story./ To me, its **taken-for-granted** vocabulary—such as the color-coded term “blackmail”/—was as **meaningful** as the story **itself**.//

C) **With** this story, Queen Aletheia introduced us **not only** to the vocabulary of “**dominance**,” “**submission**,” “**Dom**,” and “**sub**”// but **also** to the pairing of “**Master**” and “**slave**”/ in

the description of certain **intimate** and even **long-term**,
consensual partnerships between white people.//

XV. Having grown up in the wake of the Civil Rights and Women's rights movements/--**and** being a third child/—

A) I **ardently** identify with the Enlightenment aspiration to

individual rights, equality before the law, self-

determination, and what is vaguely called **freedom**, ...

B) in which rewards accrue to **talent** and **effort**, rather than

heredity or **birth order**./

C) So I had **never *conceived*** of the possibility that some people

actually **enjoy** giving up their power to decide things for

themselves./ Many people **not only find *relief*** but **also take**

pleasure in submitting to other people.

D) Let's take a quick poll. To how many of you is it news that

many adults actually enjoy submitting to others? Please use

the Reactions function on Zoom to give me a thumbs up or

an open-mouth surprise face if this fact is **news** to you.

E) [**Give an approximate count.**]

XVI. I **think** I'm smart, but I suddenly realized that I had been
stupid-blind to some **obvious** patterns of human behavior
 around me. [brief pause]

A) Many people's **romantic or erotic dreams, religion** and
politics seek well-being and pleasure ...[briefest pause]

B) **not** in personal **autonomy** and **equality**/

C) but in ego-renouncing obedience to a strong man or woman
 [flow], ...

D) whose **sometimes-arbitrary** power **tests** the followers'
 loyalty and **predictably** punishes misbehavior... [flow]

E) but, **above all**, offers the followers the uncertain possibility
 of **reassurance** and **mercy** when they please him or her
 [flow]

F) and **devastates** enemies when they threaten the followers'
 well-being.

G) Such a strong person resembles an abusive parent who would
 never let anybody else mess with their child.

H) Much of this scenario makes **strategic** sense./ People like security and, in a wild world, an **equally** wild protector and provider seems more **efficacious** than a judicious, compassionate **egg-head**./

I) But this desire is not all about strategy: some people actually find punishment and humiliation exciting, perhaps because they are forms of sustained attention and acknowledgment.
[Pause]

J) And it might be that, much like loss and success in gambling, the cycle of bullying and approval is addictive to the victim in ways that continuous, unearned, or predictable affirmation is not./

K) Are you with me so far? From now on, I'll be checking in with you periodically. When I do, please unmute briefly and let me know if you're still with me. O.K.?//

XVII. One of the reasons that I have never been **fully** initiated into the priesthoods of the religions I study and practice is the **hierarchy**./

- A) Like the Abrahamic religions,/ the Afro-Atlantic religions commemorate and idealize **past social hierarchies**.
- B) Moreover, most of the religions I know of represent the **ideal** human subject **not** as a **free, independent, self-governing,** and **equal individual/** but as an abused but obedient **son**, a well-cared-for **slave**, a **sheep**, or a submissive **bride** gladly subsumed in the identity of her [flow] **dangerously powerful** but,/ for the most part,/ **ferociously protective husband**.
- C) What distinguishes the Afro-Atlantic religions is a sense of the slave's or the bride's **great dignity** and **efficacy**./
- D) Nonetheless,/ or perhaps for that reason,// the Afro-Atlantic religions are **very hierarchical** in daily practice and **extremely** hierarchical in moments of ritual performance.
- E) Mind you, I am not criticizing this hierarchy. I am just observing how this religious conception of who owes what to whom **differs** from the conceptions that I have taken for granted for most of my life. Like most liberal academics, I

had always thought of hierarchy as intrinsically cruel,
oppressive, and exploitative.

F) Illustrating a very different and religiously inspired attitude,
my best friend in Brazil and the priest responsible for my life
in Brazilian Candomblé—/ Doté Amilton Costa/--said
I'm the only person in his life he hasn't succeeded at
dominating,/ a situation that simply **perplexes** him. [brief
pause].

G) He has always taken such good **care** of me. Indeed, he has
regularly placed me above others in his life and favored my
interests over theirs.//

H) He is **also** puzzled by my casual **self-sufficiency**.

I) TELL BUTTON AND AUTO-SUFICIENTE STORY. NOT
PRAISE BUT CRITICISM. My wife,/ who is Yoruba,/ tells
a similar story about her first observations of me.//

J) Of course, most people like to be taken care of but are
conflicted about being **dominated**,/ explaining why so many
people feel **ambivalent** about time spent with their parents,

especially their **fathers**.// Some people *deeply* conflicted about domination and submission.

K) Story of “white” biochemist and slavery (around 2017).

- 1) Conversation among 2-3 iaos and an abia, who was a white biochemist.
- 2) Wanted less hierarchy, criticizes gestures from slavery
=> looked forward to Bugalu’s succession
- 3) Me: will you correct juniors? Will people in the middle ranks of the hierarchy—between you and the new chief priest—agree to your leveling of their years of hard-won promotion within the hierarchy? No.
- 4) The abia had always employed gestures of obeisance toward me. My long acquaintance and closeness with the chief priest had convinced him that I was a high-ranking initiate. Iaos corrected him.
- 5) What should I call you? Call me whatever you’d like.

But, to tell you the truth, I’m looking for a slave. Pause.

Conversation continues.
- 6) Later approach. “I’m interested.” [Pause]//

XVIII. Are you still with me? Please unmute briefly and let me

know. Some people get lost in my stories and don't realize I'm actually making a point.

XIX. I was just making the point that, even in the heart of the rebel,

there may lurk a deep desire to submit.

XX. That desire often seems to recall the simultaneous resentment of

and desire for the approval of a harsh parent, nanny, or parent-

like oppressor. That parent figure is often suffering from his or

her own fear of rejection and experience of abuse, for which he

or she compensates by donning the role of the strong but loyal

parent whom he or she lacked.ⁱ

XXI. **[RESUME SLIDE SHOW]**

“Christ Nailed to the Cross” (approx. 1481)
by Gerard David



XXII. BDSM caused me to notice that the phenomena we call “religions” visually encode nostalgia for abusive and protective hierarchy in the form of sacralized weaponry or, more broadly, tools of violence, constraint, and compulsion that had historically been intended to cause pain and subvert the victim’s personal will. Yet worshipers imbue them with warm and fuzzy feelings.

XXIII. Such sacralized weapons include thunderbolts, maces, swords, spears, croziers, and scepters (which are stylized clubs),/ knives and tridents or pitchforks, /whips, scourges, chains, and other types of **flogger**/, arrows, nails and the cross itself—perhaps the nuclear option among tools of violence, constraint and compulsion.

XXIV. On the screen now is Gerard David’s (Hee-rahrt Dah-vid’s) “Christ Nailed to the Cross.”

CHANGE SLIDE

XXV. Here, in a further example, is the famous [flow]

A) “Ecstasy of St. Teresa” (1647-1652) [flow]

by Gian Lorenzo Bernini. Notice in the angel’s right hand the fiery arrow of love divine.

B) Also note the sadistic-looking smile on the [infantile voice]

little angel’s face.



C)

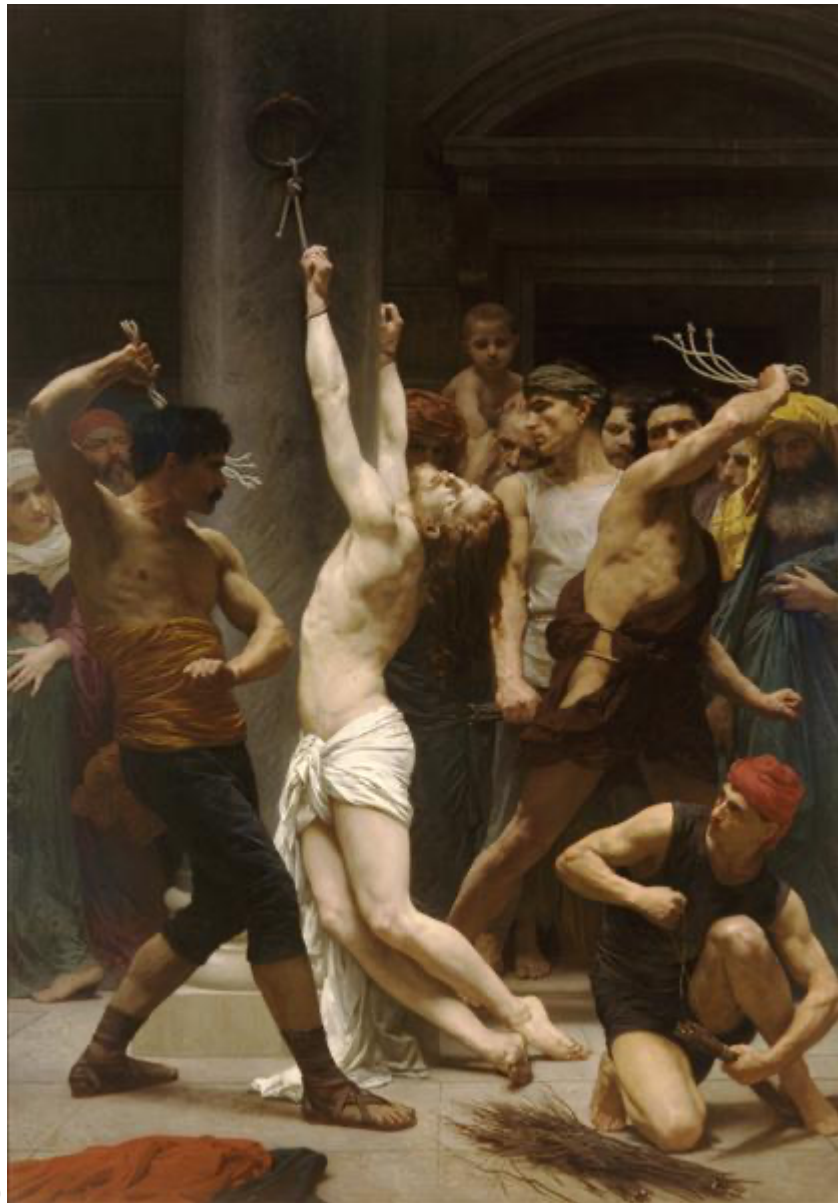
D) CHANGE SLIDE

XXVI. And here is gay icon “St. Sebastian” by Guido Reni. For somebody with arrows embedded in his torso, he looks pretty contented, // in contrast to the zombie-like **individual** in the background, whose body is armored or wrapped tight **against** any such penetration. Does anybody here know who that is? //



A)CHANGE SLIDE

B) And here is “The Flagellation of Our Lord Jesus Christ” by
[SLOW—French pronunciation] William-Adolphe
Bouguereau



C)

D) Note the use of the **scourge**, a **Roman and medieval** type of whip made of knotted rope,

1) which **differs** from the braided leather whip that **North Americans** usually associate with Afro-Atlantic slavery and BDSM.//

2) CHANGE SLIDE TO FRET KACH

Frèt kach--whip made of rope—for the Petwo spirits
(Haitian Vodou)



3) The favorite whip of the Haitian Petwo spirits—the *frèt kach*—is what you heard in my salutation at the start

of this talk. It is a hybrid, merging the braided leather whip of the plantation with the knotted rope scourge of the medieval Catholic monastery.

- 4) It's the red and black societies of Haiti, such as the Chanpwel, Bizango, and Vlinblindingue, that favor the *matinèt*, or the leather whip most reminiscent of colonial plantation hierarchy.

E) CHANGE TO SECOND BOUGUEREAU SLIDE

“Flagellation de Notre
Seigneur Jesus Christ”
(1880)

By William-Adolphe Bouguereau

Note the use of the Roman scourge, rather than of the braided leather whip normally associated with both Afro-Atlantic slavery and BDSM. Also note, however, that this late 19th-century artist depicts the flagellators as distinctly darker than Jesus.



F) Although it explicitly refers to the 1st-century crucifixion, this 1880 painting has a decidedly **19th-century** feel.

- 1) [SLOW] For example, the
contrasting complexions of Jesus and
his flagellators ... [flow]
- 2) allude to the **complexion-coded**
moral hierarchies of European
overseas imperialism
- 3) at a time when pale-skinned northern
and central Europeans

4) not only **colonized** but also **engaged**
in sex tourism in North Africa.

5) Many famous Frenchmen and
citizens of the West's **other**
Enlightened republics visited/—and
continue to visit/—North Africa,
West Africa, and the Arabian Gulf
states with the goal of being man-
handled by dark men.

6) This phenomenon also occurs within
the walls of Vatican City, between
the priests and young North African
immigrants.//ⁱⁱ

2) Please also note that Bouguereau gave Jesus a **pretty**
nice bottom [brief pause] **for a white guy**.

3) Are you with me? Mind you: I am not criticizing these
phenomena. I am just saying that they are

simultaneously racial, romantic, and religious—and
they are real.

G) I don't know if you can feel it. But, for many people, this
religious imagery **bleeds into** that of **romance and erotic**
desire.//

H) On the **one** hand,/ medieval monks and nuns said that they
flagellated themselves and each other in order to achieve
reunion with the divine, experiencing ecstasy through the
reenactment of Christ's martyrdom and through the
recollection of a time when Christians were routinely
subordinated and tortured by non-Christians.

I) On the other hand,/ the Enlightenment critics of the Roman
Catholic Church accused the monks and nuns of pursuing this
activity merely for the sake of **sexual arousal.**/ Of course,
any given monk or nun **might** have been have been doing
both.//

J) **Among** those critics of the Catholic Church was the Marquis
de Sade,/ who himself flogged others and submitted to

flogging with the **expressed** intention of achieving sexual arousal. Like Marx and Freud, the Marquis de Sade criticized religion but re-enacted its forms (Matory 2018).//

K) And the effect might not have been merely psychological.

[LOWER VOICE] From the 17th century to the 19th, **many** secular Europeans (particularly Britons and Frenchmen) recognized the spanking of grown men on the buttocks as a cure for impotency.

L) Moreover, BDSM practitioners tell me that, once the pain surpasses a certain threshold, it causes an endorphin rush that produces dissociation and ecstasy.//

M) CHANGE SLIDE

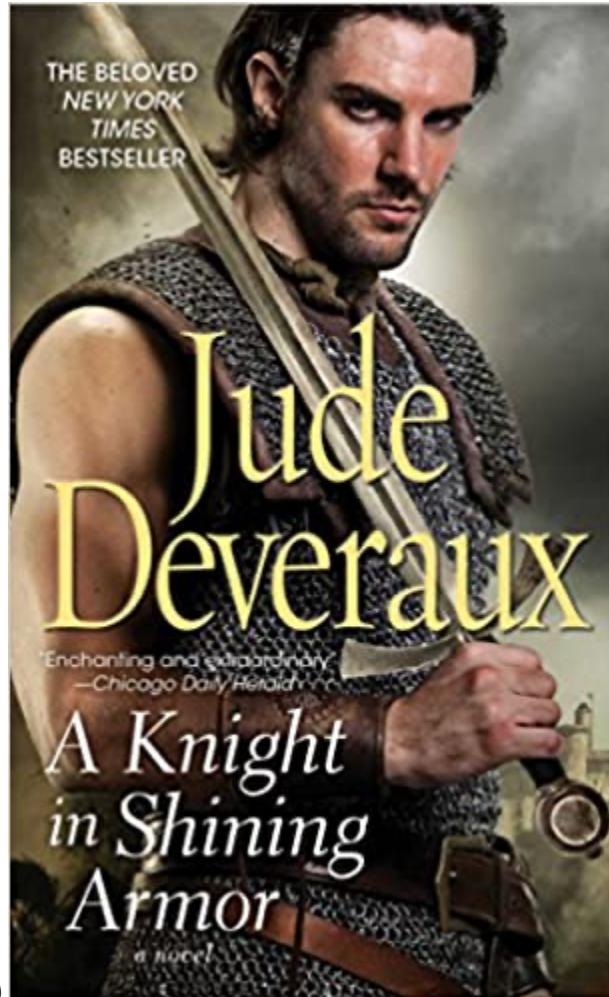
N) Cupid's Arrow **also** blurs the dividing lines that Enlightened people today like to draw among **military conquest**, **epiphany or divine passion**, and **erotic passion**.



O)

P) CHANGE SLIDE

Q)[SLOW] I won't say anything about this slide. I'll just give you a moment to think about it.



R)

S) CHANGE SLIDE

T) [SPEAK SLOWLY] And, here, I'd just like to introduce you to Excaliber Inexsuperabilis./ People find him **charming**.

[Pause]



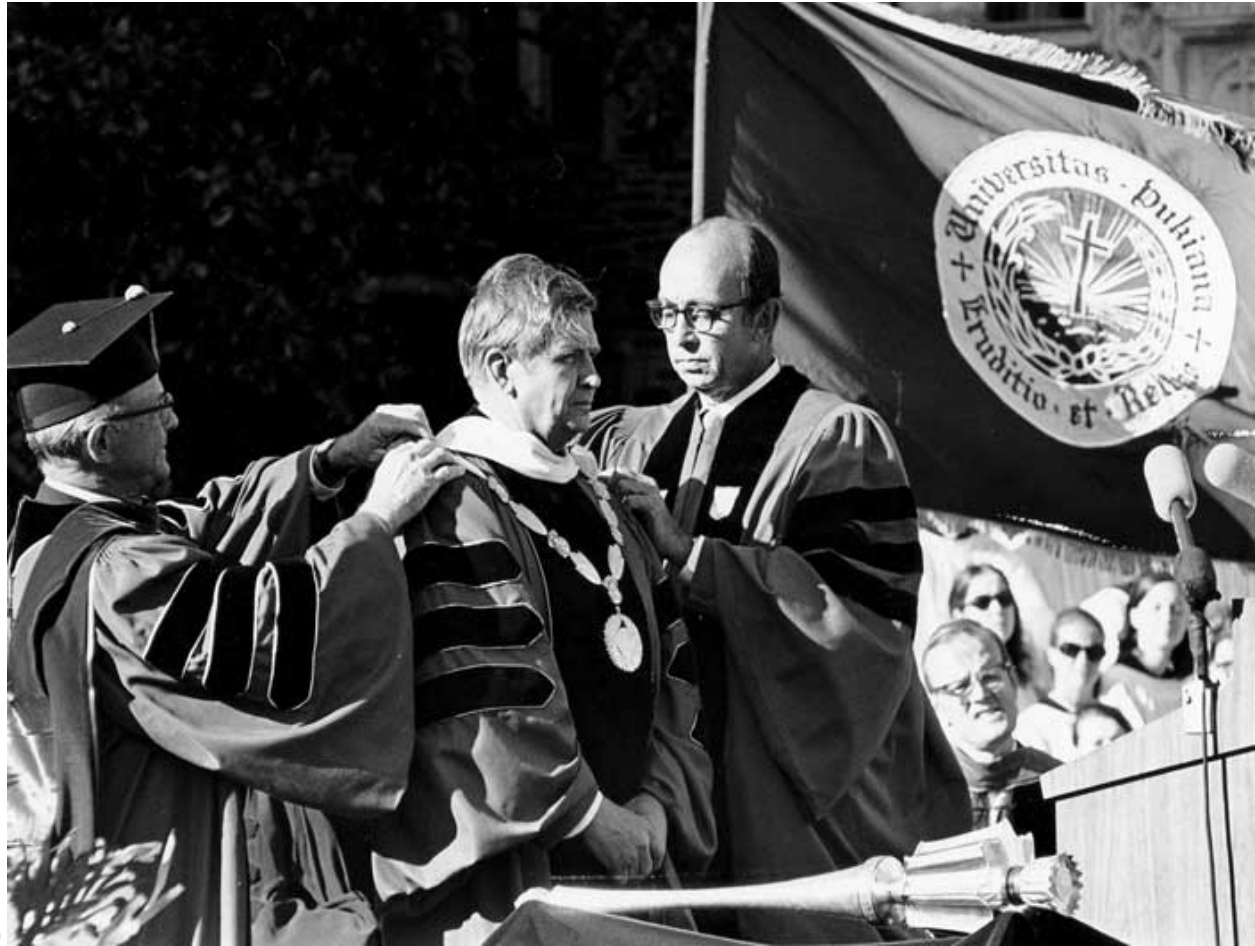
U)

V)[DON'T change slide yet]

W) [SLOW] The use of stylized, emotionally supercharged, spiritually animated, and even sparkly weapons is similarly common both in religions and in BDSM.

X)But not in religions and BDSM alone

Y)[CHANGE SLIDE]



Z)

AA) The use of consecrated weapons in the embodiment of the bonds between gods and people, Doms and subs **also** infuses the most inspiring rites of university governance.

BB) In almost all Western universities,/ the mace is the foremost symbol of the chief executive's authority./ In other words,/ even in our ostensibly most **rational** of institutions,/

the **preeminent** symbol of the executive's relationship to his or her followers and wards is a weapon of the sort originally intended to **crack open a human head**.

CC) Ostensibly Enlightened people **well up** and even **weep** when it is pulled out and waved around to the tune of "Pomp and Circumstance."/ I admit that I **myself** get a little smoke in my eyes.

DD) On screen now is former Duke University president Terry Sanford. [Slow] I bet you wouldn't want to run into him and **his** mace in a dark alley!//

XXVII. Sacralized weapons are used by the sacred or secular Master equally [flow]

A)to defend the community's integrity from **internal** dissenters and those who would **test** him for **fun**,/

B)to protect the community from **external rivals**; [flow]

C)and,/ after the tragic lapse of what is latterly called the Golden Age, to pray for the restoration of that authoritarian pax. Again irony is that the preeminent symbol of this pax

and of the beatific longing for the reunion of sovereign,
subject, and halcyon realm is typically a tool of violence.

XXVIII. It is worth noting that slavery is a constant co-presence
in even the most **liberal** functions of the university.

A) Everyone now knows that some of the most elite universities
in the US invested in, traded in, and employed slaves.

B) But did you ever wonder why the liberal arts are called the
“liberal arts”?//

C) This manner of instruction emerges from the **Greek** tradition
of training the children of the **free minority** in the skills
needed by **free people**/—in contrast to the enslaved
majority/--such as **debating before the legislature** or
defending oneself in court.

XXIX. The liberal arts curriculum retains its function in
distinguishing elites and intimidating non-elites, through
instruction in abstract and bookish grammar, strange and

cryptic new words, theoretical fashions that nobody can keep up with, and hand gestures that suggest the ambiguity and inscrutable complexity of everything.^{/iii}

XXX. CLOSE SLIDE SHOW

XXXI. Trigger warning: I will **now** begin a discussion of some erotic practices that might be regarded as **violent**,/ and I will be using the words “rape” and “penises.”/

XXXII. If you find my topic **too disturbing to bear**, I **won’t** be offended if you **choose to leave now**./ And please accept my apologies if I have already **disturbed** you in some **unproductive** way.

XXXIII. [PAUSE]

XXXIV. In religion and politics, rape and ravishment are equally prominent symbols of

A) The establishment of new authoritarian orders (as in the Roman myth of the rape,/ or abduction,/ of the Sabine [SAY-buy’n] women)/

B) The sad defeat of old authoritarian orders and the desire for their restoration (as in Muslims' lament over the Mongols' conquest of Baghdad),

C) And the mystical reunion with God or the gods that recapitulates the nostalgia for lapsed authoritarian orders.

D) Rape and ravishment are thus protean symbols of the ambivalence at the foundation of religions, civilizations, and, indeed, all communities. People both long for and regret self-determination.

E) From the viewpoint of BDSM, modern egalitarianism is a futile effort to wish away this ambivalence.//

XXXV. [LOWER VOICE] Sacred weaponry associates the idyllic order of politics, religion, intimacy, and even education with the *disruption of bodily integrity*,/ often **resulting in** the ecstatic **transcendence** of one's ego and corporal limits.

XXXVI. [FOR FN: Fittingly, worshipers and university protocol officers regularly endow these weapons with a power that **supersedes** the agency of the human wielders of these weapons.

XXXVII. For example, **necklace** that accompanies the mace of university presidents is usually called a “chain,” reminding us of the ambiguous status of principled social hierarchy. It operates by the threat of violence but acquires its legitimacy from the leader’s pretense of slave-like service to principle higher than his own selfishness. END FN.]

XXXVIII. In this way, sacred weapons illustrate worshipers’, lovers’ and citizens’ deep ambivalence about the individualist, egalitarian freedom of choice and self-determination idealized by the Enlightenment./

XXXIX. It seems to me that **such nostalgia** for a past hierarchical social order and its violence is **not** merely a **survival** of a pre-modern past. The Abrahamic religions are rich in images of and stories about the ideal worshiper as a “slave”—or, in euphemistic translation, a “servant”—to God. This imagery certainly demonstrates the appeal of such hierarchy to worldly rulers and masters, but the longevity of these religions

suggest the long history of its appeal to lower-ranking members of society, as well.

XL. In my 1,000-page book manuscript,/ I argue that **romance**, **religion** and **nativist authoritarian politics** address emotional longings **created** by secular nationalism, coldly rule-bound bureaucracy, the individual's futile effort to avoid subordination to others, and the incessant economic competition that is capitalism. The novelty of these emotional longings and their expression in dramatic rituals of submission resembles the novelty of religious fundamentalism, which is, similarly, a hypertrophied literalist antiquarianism in response to novel historical challenges and alternatives. Just as urbanization gives rise to the romanticization of the forest and the countryside, so do political egalitarianism, individualism, self-determination, and the sacralization of bodily integrity give rise to a uniquely hypertrophied, literalist, and antiquarian ritual dramatizations of the opposite.

XLI. Even for the most accomplished people in our system/—if not
 ESPECIALLY for them—/the constant need to prove one’s
 dignity and worth through individual self-sufficiency and
 interpersonal competition can be exhausting and even more
painful than the whip./ Indeed,/ to some,/ the whip provides a
 measure of **relief** from such **existential pain**.//

XLII.[LOWER VOICE] BDSM opened my eyes to these phenomena
 in much of our **modern romance, religion and politics**.

XLIII. BDSM highlights a psychic truth about modern romance that
 is **also** implicit in the vocabulary of the “*knight in shining*
armor,” the “*master bedroom*” and the “*king-sized bed*,” as
 well as the tragedy-prone **violence** of cupid’s famous arrow.^{iv}

XLIV. Are you still with me? [PAUSE]

XLV. So what is BDSM?

XLVI. **Again, BDSM stands for**

A) [EXTEMPORIZE] Bondage/Discipline,

Dominance/submission, Sado-masochism./

B) BDSM is typically defined by **sharply** polarized and hierarchical roles in one's intimate partnerships.//

C) Participants call this phenomenon “**power exchange**,” or “**authority transfer**”//—that is, **consensually** surrendering great authority to the Dom or Master, [flow]

1) whose foremost **obligation** is to keep the sub or slave as safe as possible. Masters describe this principle as [slow] “protecting the property.”/

2) The foremost **objective** of a BDSM scene, or performance, is to propel the sub or slave into ecstatic trance by means of **psychological mastery** and the delivery of **strong physical sensations**./

- D) Doms apply a variety of strong physical sensations to the sub: tickling, biting, kicking and slapping,/ whipping and flogging,/ mild electrocution,/ needle play, fire play, knife play/ and so forth.
- E) Many Doms regard their subs as **canvasses**. Such Doms like to leave marks, share the photos of their art with friends, and monitor the changing color and shape of the scars as they heal.//
- F) But, mind you, the technique is as much psychological as physical. For example, one might show the sub a **Bowie knife** or a **dagger** but then run the edge of a **credit card** down his or her back.
- G) DO YOU GET WHAT I'M SAYING?//
- H) The point is to push the sub to the **thrilling** edge of fear, excitement, self-discovery, and self acceptance **without** injuring them permanently or **breaking** them psychologically. My best friend in BDSM is a white male

Dom who compares a BDSM relationship to an “amusement park” and each scene to a “ride.”

- I) For example, when you have a history of personal or collective trauma or feelings of inadequacy from your high-pressure job or your judgmental parents,// you sometimes want to **wallow** in the worry.
- J) However, a skilled Dom knows how to help you acknowledge and dramatize your inner pain,/ and then show you, through “after-care,”^v the approval, comfort, and loyalty that await you on the other side of the re-enacted trauma.//
- K) Hence, BDSM practitioners understand ideal scene,/ or performance,// **not** as a **power trip** on the part of the Dom or Master/ but as an act of **service** by the Dom, facilitating the **self-acceptance** and the **ecstatic pleasure** of the sub.^{vi} In long-term relationships, such scenes can be used to re-consecrate the deep and ideally **inseparable** bond between the two parties, **rescuing** the partners from stultifying routine

and mutual inattention. Doesn't all of this sound like religion?

- L) In **organized** BDSM, consummate emphasis is placed on prior consent and safe words. However, there are **some** subs and slaves who prefer to **give up** the option of saying no.//
- M) Like the slave spirits of the Haitian Vodou, Cuban Palo Mayombe, and Caribbean Espiritismo,/ kinky slaves are usually highly competent people [flow] who love to serve in the accomplishment of the agenda of a thoughtful and principled Master—a Master who embodies a higher principle and honors his or her own obligations to others./
- N) For example, I know a slave who can organize one's household affairs with an almost **unimaginably efficient** logic and attention to detail/—all intent on accomplishing the daily comfort, constant convenience, and long-term goals of the Master./
- O) Kinky slaves love to serve, so they are **not happy** when you leave them alone. They want your attention, your direction,

and your earned approval. And/ when they face emotional or social crises,/ they expect your full-time, loving guidance and re-assurance./ In sum, being a Master is **hard work**./

P) ARE YOU WITH ME?

XLVII. Since 2015, I have been **asking around** among my neighbors (who are all white), my Duke colleagues, the counselors at Duke's Women's Center, and half of the white people I meet in my travels in the US./ After learning of my research on this topic, a dozen Duke students/—including one from China--/have revealed to me their own involvement.

A)I have learned, much to my surprise, that BDSM is NOT rare.

B) Masters, Johnson, and Kolodny wrote in 1995 that about 10% of the US population reported engaging in BDSM at least on an occasional basis (Faccio, Casini, and Cipolleta 2014).

C) And “According to estimates by the Kinsey Institute and others, 5 percent to 10 percent of the adult America population regularly engages in some form of D&S [that is,

Dominance and Submission]” (Brame, Brame, and Jacobs 1993:7-8).

D) Many people I meet learned what they think are the inner workings of BDSM through the *Shades of Grey* novels by E.L. James, the film series by the same name, or the newspaper articles and podcasts of Dan Savage.

E) [LOWER VOICE] Most of the practitioners I know are **college-educated white professionals**. But I also met many practitioners who are soldiers, police officers, or prison guards./ Many others, still, are refugees from strict Southern white evangelical backgrounds.

F) I now know a half-dozen Master/slave couples, have attended dozens of semi-public or private BDSM parties (some of which are **hosted**/ and many of which are **attended**/ by Duke faculty, staff and students).

G) I have attended numerous events, such as

- 1) the North Carolina Slave Hunt

- 2) a large BDSM weekend retreat in New York for people of color,
- 3) and several more generic BDSM conferences and retreats.
- 4) I also regularly attend meetings of the southeastern chapter of a national organization called “Masters and slaves Together,” which is now held online. Thus, COVID has allowed me to participate in monthly conversations with the same score of people for two and a half years now.

XLVIII. The people I have met in the organized Scene are often profoundly insightful and highly introspective. Many of the sadists, in particular, conduct highly formalized and professional-looking psychological testing on their subs./

XLIX. One little Black sadist in a teddy-bear suit told me his aim is, and I quote, to “crack the glass, not break it” so that the sub

achieves psychic and spiritual breakthroughs only to the extent that she can bear them.//

- L. I have also heard disturbing tales about the UNORGANIZED practice of BDSM among Duke undergraduates.
- LI. One counselor at Duke University's Women's Center told me that more than a few of her patients are women and gay men who report having suddenly been slapped or had their hair pulled during sex./
- LII. They didn't like it, but they **froze** like the proverbial deer in the headlights,/ saying and doing **nothing** to stop the unwanted violence. Although they felt violated, they went back to the same partner and submitted to the same violence, repeatedly.

[fast and flow]
- LIII. Having been denied the opportunity to discuss the matter beforehand, these young patients typically feel confused. They want to complain/ but feel that they have inadvertently given consent.

LIV. They disliked the experience but found some aspect of it fulfilling and compelling enough to go back for more, apparently on their own volition.

LV. Their ambivalence is cringe-worthy but is perhaps emblematic of the defining social and psychological condition of modernity.//

LVI. Are you still with me?

LVII. So what does all of this have to do with religious studies?

A) First, what is called religion today is arguably the set of beliefs and practices exiled from government on the grounds of their antagonism toward the principle that people are fundamentally free, equal, and self-determined individuals entitled to exclusive control over their own bodies.

B) Religions and Black people share the status of exceptions to these premises of the post-Enlightenment republic.

C) Moreover, I am advancing the observation that

- 1) First, religions tend to re-enact ancient and violent forms of social hierarchy.
- 2) Second, that a bittersweet nostalgia for such violent hierarchy is regularly encoded in stylized and consecrated weapons—or tools of violence, constraint, and compulsion—which we are then persuaded to associate with love, protection, healing, fulfillment, and social solidarity.
- 3) And, third, that in these ways, BDSM very much resembles a religion.

D) Finally, the violent historical social hierarchy most fundamentally re-enacted in BDSM—as in US American romance, religion, and politics generally—is racialized slavery (including the heartfelt **grievance** in this country's most religious region, that slavery and the forms of neo-slavery that **succeeded** it were **unfairly abolished**).

LVIII. As I began to argue in my last book, not only the economy but also the romance, the religion, and the politics of

contemporary white US Americans are fundamentally
 inextricable from Europe's troubled marriage with western
 Africa over the past 500 years.

LIX. From the moment I walked into The Chamber in Columbus,
 Ohio, it was as obvious to me as it has been inconceivable to my
 new white friends in BDSM/ that BDSM is chockful of racial
 symbolism.

LX. The racial root symbolism of BDSM is evident in

A) the vocabulary of "Master" and "slave," alongside
 the symbolic centrality of the American style
 braided-leather whip.

B) "Kink,"/ an alternative term for BDSM and
 kindred erotic practices,/ is also a term for Black
 people's hair.

C) Even **more** probatively, the **opposite** of "kink" is
 "vanilla"—clearly a reference to the banality of
 white middle-class life./

D) Up until the mid-20th century, the term “fetish” **itself** was **primarily** a reference to Black gods and religions.

E) Moreover, the uniform of BDSM, or kink, is skin-tight black leather and latex,/ which looks to me like donning a black skin to “walk on the wild side.”

F) EXPL DEBATE WITH WHITE BDSM

PRACTITIONERS ABOUT THE MEANING OF BLACK LEATHER.

G)(1) MILITARY JACKETS. Why the black ones rather than the brown ones

H)(2) CLASSIC BIKER MOVIE, Marlon Brando’s

“The Wild Ones” (1953). In it, Brando’s gag wears black leather jackets, whereas their rivals wear jackets of brown leather. Do you know the name of the white protagonist’s motorcycle gang?

“The Black Rebel Motorcycle Gang”!^{vii}

I) MOREOVER, MAPPLETHORPE'S MODELS
EITHER WEAR BLACK LEATHER OR ARE
BLACK. THE BLACK MODELS DON'T
WEAR BLACK LEATHER.

J) However, what is most tellingly and **distinctively**
Afro-Atlantic about BDSM is its amplification of
the widespread Western representation of Black
men as the most masculine and the well-endowed
among men.

K) I'll say more about this in a minute./

LXI. There is a growing literature,/ written mostly by African
American women,/ about what some Black women find
appealing about erotic submission that directly references the
history of racialized slavery [e.g., Ariane Cruz and Jamilah
Amber Musser]. BDSM's historical and racial reference to
racialized slavery tends to be obvious to Black female scholars.

- A) I have encountered among Black **BDSM** practitioners and among the practitioners of the **Afro-Atlantic** religions, considerable interest in the overlap between the two, including the importance of trance in both sets of traditions.
- B) I argue that **both** of these sets of traditions as we know them today are profoundly imprinted with the legacy and the imagery of Atlantic chattel slavery.
- C) A major difference, though, lies in the social origins of the chief practitioners.
- D) One population, recently released from slavery, found safety and shelter in religious institutions that, in many ways, recapitulated the hierarchies of the plantation/—hierarchies that remain appealing to some of the greatest potential beneficiaries of the Enlightenment's promises/—that is, Black people throughout Latin America and the urban US.^{viii}//

E) The other population consists of the greatest existing beneficiaries of the Enlightenment—bourgeois white Americans.

F) The current manuscript examines the appeal of archaic hierarchy to both populations. The main goal of today's talk,/ however,/ is to open up a conversation/—from an Afro-Atlantic perspective/--concerning the deep ambivalence about freedom, individual rights (including freedom from corporal punishment), and political equality that I believe *defines whiteness*,/ as well as the symbolic and material role of Black people in the **management** of such white ambivalence.//

LXII. In their intimate and fantasy lives--some of the greatest beneficiaries of the Enlightenment promise of freedom and citizenship/ wish to become slaves and even to subordinate themselves to Black people.

A) This wish interdigitates with the fantasy/ (also propagated in the Abrahamic faiths)/ that,/ by surrendering control,/ the weak and those vulnerable to overthrow or even to liberal guilt can ultimately count on the goodwill of their own well-chosen Master.

B) But, in these fantasies, there's often an inversion of quotidian social hierarchies.

C) The Master might be an impoverished carpenter born of homeless parents and tortured to death on account of his abusive father's master plan.//

LXIII. Alternatively, that Master may be a white, Black or Asian **woman**, or a ***Black man***.

A) For example, Malcolm X appears to have had a kinky relationship, for pay, with a wealthy gay white man named William Paul Lennon. Malcolm X's biographer Manning Marable paraphrases Malcolm as follows (only substituting

Malcolm's name for the reportedly **fake** name given in this passage of Malcolm's autobiography):

B) "Once a week, [Malcolm] went to the home of this old, rich Boston blueblood, pillar-of-society aristocrat. He paid [Malcolm] to undress them both, then pick up the old man like a baby, lay him on his bed, then stand over him and sprinkle him all over with *talcum powder*. [Malcolm] said the old man would actually reach his climax from that."¹

C) ARE YOU STILL WITH ME?//

LXIV. Indeed, in my six years of participant-observer research on BDSM, I have observed numerous temporary interracial scenes and met several interracial BDSM families,/ or circles of relationship,/ centered on Dominant Black men.

A) Typically, the subs in these houses are either all Black woman or all white women./

¹ Manning Marable 2011). *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (NYC: Penguin), p.66. In *A Lie of Reinvention: Correcting Manning Marable*, Jared Ball reportedly says that Marable's attribution of these events to Malcolm is a lie.

B) In gay interracial vanilla and BDSM, / or Leather, / relationships, **too**, Black people are generally expected to be the dominant parties—

C) But not without some discomfort on the part of many white men in the Scene.

LXV. [PROBABLY SKIP THIS SECTION:

LXVI. For example, as in much of the vanilla world, the consensus among kinksters is that Black men's penises are larger than white men's. To North Americans, this observation might appear obvious or banal. However, Gilberto Freyre's charter of 20th-century Brazilian national identity pre-supposes that Black men's penises are *smaller* than white men's, and thoughts about the racial correlates of penis size are, as far as I am aware, alien to Nigerian thinking.

A) For example, at a 2019 Slave Hunt that I attended in North

Carolina, I lounged in the tent of two Black male Doms with several white female subs.²

B) A white male Dom and friend stopped by our tent and, in the

course of the conversation, mentioned that he used a super-sized dildo in impact play—that is, inducing “thuddy” pain in the bottom with a heavy, solid object, as opposed to the stinging pain of a cane or a whip.

C) When I asked what color the dildo was (I was messing with

him), he knew exactly what I meant and immediately replied, “White.”

D) The white women subs around me mocked him with a laugh

that said “As if!”//

LXVII. Later on, in the concession area of the Slave Hunt, I met the

Black Dom in charge of that tent.

A) His name in the BDSM scene is “Monster Black.”

² The Slave Hunt was recently and officially renamed “The Hunt” out of sensitivity to the concerns of a leading Black member of the community.

B) As he strolled around, he carried around a super-sized,
chocolate-brown dildo, the color of a dark Black man's skin.

C) In response to a white merchant's vocalized doubts that the
Black Dom was that big or could use this dildo for
penetration, the Black Dom bragged that the dildo did not
exceed his size by much.//

LXVIII. END SKIPPED SECTION]

LXIX. This phallic rivalry for dominance has discomfiting
implications for white supremacists.

LXX. (It has ambiguous implications—equally flattering and
fatal—for Black men, too. But I will leave that matter for the
Q&A period, if you're interested.)

LXXI. One of the most common and potent insults directed by
members of the alt-right toward peers who appear too
compromising toward the rights of women and minorities is the
word “cuck.” Thus, such an ostensibly weak white man is said
to have been cuckolded, implicitly by a Black man.

- A) During the Trump administration, psychologist David Ley interviewed dozens of conservative white men who “said that they sometimes despaired at their [in]ability to live up to the ‘alpha male’ ideals they espoused and sometimes found that giving up that control was erotic, as they fantasized about their partners with other men” (Ley 2018:4).//
- B) A major genre of kinky pornography called “cuck porn” now flourishes, apparently based on a large market of straight or bisexual white men who, at least in the privacy of their homes, relish the fantasy of being shown up and thus dominated by a straight Black man. In these scenarios, the Black man typically ignores the white man, but the white wife says emasculating things to her white husband.
- C) Trump adviser Roger Stone and former Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort richly illustrate the point.³

³ David J. Ley (2018). “The Politics of Cuckolding: Why are conservative men more interested in sharing their wives?” *Psychology Today*, 23 July.

D) Thanks to Julian Assange's Wikileaks, we know that—and I quote--“Manafort would wait until the other men, usually Black males, had sex with his wife and left, before he had sex with her” (Ley 2018:3).

LXXII. Roger Stone also dabbled in this practice.//

LXXIII. The Marquis de Sade was the original eponym of sadism, albeit not one who placed a high value on the consent of his subs.

A) Yet Sade was also an activist in the era of the French Revolution and, arguably, the most famous of the Enlightenment *philosophes*, better known than even Rousseau. Incidentally, Rousseau was also a masochist. He fantasized about a mean woman, reminiscent of his governess, spanking him, and he apparently engaged in enactments of this scenario.

B) Along with Barry Goldwater, Paul Manafort, Roger Stone, and Donald Trump,/ Sade would have felt quite comfortable in the libertarian wing of today's Republican Party.

C) And, if you believe what I have said about the symbolic overlaps among religion, romance, and politics,/ you might also understand why white evangelicals are so comfortably allied with these libertines.//

LXXIV. Now get this. In the BDSM Scene, subs are typically people with lofty daytime social statuses or onerous responsibilities in the management of other people's lives.

A) In BDSM, such people report that it is exhausting to be in charge all of the time, unable to display one's inevitably vulnerable humanity.

B) David Ley's analysis suggests that some of them experience imposter syndrome.⁴

C) Literary scholar John K. Noyes associates such submission among white European males in the late 19th century with liberal guilt and with the titillating fear of rebellion by the oppressed.

D) My wife, Bunmi, and several other Black women who have heard my argument insist that the generations of cruelty that white people have inflicted on us must have had an injurious

⁴ The phenomenon of powerful men seeking to give up control may be allied with another, more mundane pattern that I have seen in an admittedly small number of cases. I wonder if you have seen it, too.

Sometimes, insecure but highly accomplished men fixate on another man to admire exaggeratedly, even to love. And the target of that admiration and love is often quite mediocre or boring, as in the case of Freud's homoerotic feelings toward and pursuit of approval from Wilhelm Fliess.//

and intergenerational effect on white people's own psyches,
for which BDSM might provide some kind of relief.

E) Seen through the lens of spirituality,/ many BDSM subs
might be seen as control freaks/ self-consciously pursuing the
emptying, nullification, or suspension of the ego. And they
do so based upon the model of the Black slave.

F) The majority of my white neighbors and friends,/ most of
whom are highly accomplished people,/ tell me that, if they
practiced BDSM,/ they would be subs. I was shocked. But
it's true.

LXXV. I wonder generally whether the white supremacist pressure
on white men to play the alpha-male uber-subject of the
Enlightenment actually **intensifies** the desire for a designated
and safe space in which to submit absolutely.

A) I do not have sufficient evidence to answer generally, but I
have personally witnessed that some powerful and highly
accomplished white men derive ecstatic pleasure from

voluntary scenes of their own forcible subjection/—often by women or by men of color. Of course, you can also see that in the TV series *Billions*, *Pose*, and *Bonding*.

B) It's not made up.

C) It's funny, but it's real. And very human.^{ix}

ⁱ In the article, maybe discuss the dark mother Ezili Danto's abandonment by her husband and her alternation between charging at men with her knife and demanding that they kiss her. They dare not flinch in the first case or refuse in the second case. She is an extremely domineering mother, but she also generously hands out the meat of her sacrifices to her deferential followers. People gather around her tightly, whether she is threatening or nourishing. Report the sentimental song about motherhood popular in Jacmel amid these performances.

Yo voye rele mwen m'prale (3 times)
 Jou manman'm mouri kòmòn'm pral fè?
 Kòmòn m pral fè (x2)
 Jou manman'm mouri
 Kòmòn map fè?

This song literally speaks of the trauma of losing one's mother, but the worshipers who sang this and many other songs about losing parents equally referred to the inevitable loss of one's *kanzo*, or initiatic, mother or father—that is, the leader of one's temple, who is, ideally, as fiercely protective and ungrudgingly generous as a mother. (Rousseau's governess comes to mind.)

In 2017, one could hear people spontaneously singing this chai song to themselves as they walked or worked.

The most poignant occasion I witnessed was when a young woman who had been in separate conflicts with a half-dozen people in the temple. And she resided in the temple because her mother had already kicked her out of the mother's house.

Just days before she was kicked out of the temple, she sang this song in a crowd of her adversaries and friends.

Her own impending disconnection from the community was like losing one's mother.

ⁱⁱ For article: also notice the light-skinned assistant in the red head-tie, who looks on with ambivalence. His posture shows fear and an empathetic sense of vulnerability, while his gaze reveals curiosity and, perhaps, desire. Does he want to whip or be whipped?

ⁱⁱⁱ This elite gatekeeping is on display in the snobbism scholars direct toward vocationalism and toward the corporal and quasi-military discipline of big-time sports on college campuses.

^{iv} Also, the weak knees some people get when they see a man in military or law-enforcement uniform, not to mention the fascination with royal weddings.

^v Note the use of the same term in the description of the care given to rape victims.

^{vi} However, Doms are often redressing emotional traumas of their own. Some Doms report having been neglected, left unprotected, or abused during their youth, resulting in their desire to offer someone else the protection, guidance, and succor that they themselves had been denied. In organized BDSM, it is emphasized that a Dom must never use BDSM to inflict their displaced anger or desire for vengeance on the sub.

^{vii} It may be that the fascination with crime in contemporary Western drama is a response not only to the desire for individual freedom from social constraints but also, in the case of movies about the gangster and motorcycle gang, a response to the desire for a form of social solidarity and hierarchy that is so absent from daily capitalist life that it, too, appears anti-social.

^{viii} Jean-Daniel Lafontant says the red and black secret, or sacred, societies of Haiti reference colonial hierarchies, as well. For example, the titles of their office holders include Emperor, President, Captain, and Commander (*Buro*). African American churches tend to be devoted to the worship of a blue-eyed, blond-haired Jesus who, counterfactually, has been made to look like their former enslavers and current oppressors. They call him “King Jesus.”

^{ix} Sum: amid the stresses of continual capitalist competition and democratic debate, the slave can look like the picture of happiness. When one has been forced into submission by empire or failure in commerce or politics, the rebel slave is an attractive model. The often-told story of Atlantic slavery, like the image of the Islamic Golden Age, offers an anchor of supra-empirical fixity through which the traumas of today can be assimilated and the in which those traumas can be dramatized and conditionally resolved. Many of the greatest opportunities and the greatest traumas of contemporary life flow from freedom as the preeminent authorizing discourse of right action and explanation of failure or success. Yet “freedom” is vague and ambiguous. For example, does it refer to national independence, which can be achieved only through hierarchically organized resistance, or does it mean individual autonomy and self-sufficiency? By the second definition of “freedom,” if you love anyone, you cannot be free, and you can be free only if you love no one. The central role in the drama of this kind of freedom—favored by the later Adam Smith, the Marquis de Sade, Barry Goldwater, and the Republican Party that emerged from his opposition to the New Deal and to equality of rights for African Americans is what Sade called the “ferocious man” and Goldwater called the “uncommon man,” whose unlimited pursuit of self-interest is the primary index of freedom and whose energy fortifies the whole system. His destruction of the losers is a net benefit to the system. Amid such freedom, everyone is taught to aspire to be him, resulting in the disappointment of the 99% who will fail to achieve any semblance of his success and seeming independence. The 99% have the alternative options of being the wife or the beta of the ferocious man, and participating in his sovereignty over the rest. Or they can enact the role of the rebel slave and usurp his role in ferociously oppressing others. All of these ambitions flourish in the religions, the romance, and the politics of white US Americans.