

Limit consent; asymmetries of power, passibility, and the infantile sexual

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A colleague, who I will call Imani, is playing with her 4-year-old daughter, Lumi. “Be the monster!” Lumi orders her. Imani leaps forward, snatching Lumi. “I will eat you” she growls. Lumi squeals with delight, and fights back while giggling. Suddenly she yells, “Stop!” Imani stops. They look at each other. A moment passes. “Again!” Lumi commands. Imani grabs her, again the scary monster. Lumi, fights back, laughing, then screams- “Stop!”. They repeat this start-and-stop game for a bit until Lumi looks vaguely unsatisfied. “We’ll play a *different* game,” she announces. “I tell you to be the monster; you scare me; I say stop; but this time, You! Don’t! Stop!” “I don’t?” Imani hesitates. “No,” Lumi replies assuredly, “you go on and on, more and more.” “What if it gets too much?” Imani asks anxiously. But the little girl is disinterested in this adult question of safety and careful calibration. “You *have* to keep going or else it won’t work!” she says impatiently. “Don’t worry, let’s just go *on and on, more and more.*”

I will use this playful exchange to discuss the links between consent and the psychic economy of the infantile sexual, Freud’s “fundamental discovery. . . [and] the object of psychoanalysis”. I will suggest that affirmative consent (AC), which has garnered attention recently through the #MeToo movement, is a concept of limited analytic utility. This is because it presumes a subject fully conscious and who, by being deliberate in her communications, can more-or-less anticipate the effects of her assent. AC promises to help prevent traumatic encounters, or foster mutually satisfying sexual experiences; but sexuality is far more complex, far more conflicted than AC implies. I will propose a different kind of consent paradigm, *limit consent*, which I will suggest may offer us a different vantage point to thinking about sexuality and, also, about the analytic situation. Limit consent hinges not on respecting limits but on transgressing them, a transgression, as in the example with Lumi, that is authorized and yet, unpredictable. This crossing of limits is not make-believe or performance; it involves risk. It comes dangerously close to the line of something going wrong. Why play with fire at all? Because LC may enable the pursuit of states of overwhelm. Overwhelm- a term I use as a noun rather than in its usual form, as an adjective- comes about when escalating excitations are pushed to the limit. It is an excessive and driven state; that can bring about a radical unbinding of the

ego, unraveling existing translations, to make room for new ones. I will explain why I think that sexuality, especially in its transgressive and perverse forms, may be ideally equipped to incite overwhelm and offer a clinical illustration of work with states of overwhelm.

Part I. Limit Consent: Risk, Nonlinear Time, And The Blurring Of Active vs. Passive

Lumi and Imani's play is ordinary, yet complex. The first part ("be the monster," "stop," "start again") involves a negotiation that Lumi directs; Lumi decides when the game starts/stops. But Imani is not just following Lumi's directions; for the play to work, she has to be inventive in how she takes on Lumi's direction; and, she has to perform her growls and grabs monstrously enough for Lumi to be at least startled, even somewhat scared. This is what will make the game feel real. But since Imani becomes and stops being a monster on command, the play is also not real. To say this differently: as all good play, the game is both real and not real at the same time. Because it is delicately attuned, the play stays in the sphere of a playful and well-regulated interaction; it does not become "too much". It's exciting, but manageably so. But the game turns a corner when Lumi asks Imani to violate her limits going forward. From a temporal perspective, this new game is nonlinear: Lumi is authorizing Imani *now* to disregard her command to stop *later*. This is, in part, what makes the play risky. How will Imani know that Lumi will still want her "no" to be ignored when in fact she pronounces it? What if she changes her mind, and she indeed wants the game to stop?

Lumi's request is unusual; it is not structured around stating and respecting her boundaries, it tries to do something else. Lumi, in effect, asks: 'I am asking you to refuse *my* 'no' and push through *your* anxiety about it too so that you may take us into a state of more and more', she may be trying to craft the conditions that will permit the emergence of a new experience. This involves not being in control but relinquishing it. And while such requests can easily be mistaken for masochistic passivity, this is not necessarily or always the case. **At work here is an extraordinarily elaborate process of negotiating how one can give oneself over to the other;** it is a consent negotiation yielding a state of radical receptivity, of susceptibility *to* the other. Lyotard (1988) has called this state possibility.

I use the term perverse not as a marker of pathology but in its original analytic meaning, to denote sexuality that is polymorphously perverse and not organized reproductively or heterogenitally (Freud 1905).

Passibility is distinct from activity *and* from passivity, it is a state “by which alone we are fit to receive and, as a result, to modify and do, and perhaps even to enjoy” (p. 117). It is akin to what Manny Ghent (1990) called *surrender*, which he distinguished from masochism or submission. Submission, Ghent argued, is heavy, it weighs one down. Surrender, however, is something that is offered; it cannot be demanded or exacted by the other. If it occurs, it occurs spontaneously, under particular relational conditions (“facilitative circumstances”). Surrender involves more of a dispossession of oneself, a giving oneself over that permits one to luxuriate in being besieged by the other, being subject to the other. Its precise coordinates cannot be mapped out ahead of time, and this is what makes it risky. The game clearly courts a certain kind of edge.

If Imani complies with Lumi’s request, a lot can go wrong. Imani could go too far and traumatize Lumi and herself. If she does choose to play along, Imani will have to enact a strange version of mindful attention. To obey Lumi *now* she’ll have to disobey her *later*. To do so Imani will have to suspend her own preference to “play it safe”. But this is not all. To go the extra step of purposefully crossing the limits of Lumi’s ‘no’, Imani will not just be just “innocently” playing along; she’ll need to bear the rousing of something inside her. The force roused is related to infantile sexuality, to Imani’s own sadomasochism. This is a force that subtends all psychosexuality; it is “the most common and the most significant of all the perversions” (Freud, 1905). And while it is not itself destructive, it can get out of hand, causing trauma or pain. So if Imani wants to play along, she will have to assume two kinds of risk; on a conscious level, she has to push past her worry that she may upset/hurt Lumi. Less consciously, she will have to tolerate the rousing of a largely sadistic unconscious desire to be roused in her; this normative sadism, a sadism existing in all of us, is what will ultimately enable Imani to push past Lumi’s “no”. But it is also what Imani has to protect Lumi from as well. Neither Imani nor Lumi knows what come next. That, in fact, may be exactly the point.

In the game’s early part (start/stop/start), there was clear, precise, and consciously unambivalent communication aiming at a desired outcome-AC. AC, and its medical counterpart informed consent (IC), have emerged from long and painful histories of transgressions in personal relationships and medical contexts. Their goal is incredibly important: to protect those with lesser power by ensuring sharing of information, and the setting and respecting of the other’s limits. But the AC model is insufficiently nuanced to account for the workings of

sexuality; and it does not help explain all types of consent negotiations. In Lumi's new game, for instance, neither her giving her consent to Imani to trespass her nor the consent she solicits of Imani are of the affirmative sort: **the stopping point is not clear; the communication has built-in vagueness; and there is no precise aim.**

Paradoxically, if, in the interest of proceeding with the game, **Imani embraces the sadistic impulses animated in her and, also, tries to keep them in check she will, in some way, also be surrendering to Lumi's desire-and to the unknowability of what comes next.** Both hers and Lumi's consents involve a letting go of control. Of course, their positions in relation to that letting go are asymmetrical; and they have different developmental capacities when it comes to appreciating what they are getting involved in. But the point I am trying to make is that what they are implicitly agreeing to and inviting in this negotiation, even if it's not spelled out and even if its implications are not fully known in advance, is to be subjected to something unknown (Butler 2011), to being vulnerable and to being surprised. Why does Lumi make this strange request? We can't know for sure. One possibility is that, sated with the repetition, she wants to experience something new, something that will lead her into what she calls *more and more*. Unlike AC, this is not about setting limits and observing boundaries; it is about initiating and responding to an invitation to transgress them. To mark how closely such consent approaches the limit, I'll call it *limit consent*.

Limit consent centers on surrendering to an other in order to enable a new experience.

Such move into unknown territory risks injury, but if injury occurs it is inadvertent. It results from infantile sexual urges that have gone too far, beyond play, with neither party knowing it until after the fact. If something goes awry it's because Imani does not "read" Lumi well; because Lumi may be unable to signal; because Lumi is unable to know when, on balance, she *really* wants Imani to stop; or because Imani's infantile sexual takes over, becomes too inflamed and she loses control.

Imagine a related but quite different scene in which two adults agree to enact a play-rape scenario. The person in Lumi's position, the "bottom," lets the other decide the stopping point-and may, thus, appear to be powerless. Of course, since she also scripts the play it could also be argued that she is, in essence, the one in control. Conversely, the person in Imani's position, the

“top,” could be seen as the person in control as she is the one with decision making power. And yet, since her authority is granted—and can be revoked—by her partner, she could be seen as merely executing orders. All this to say that while the erotic charge issues precisely from the fact that there *is* indeed a power differential, we would not be correct to view this encounter as one in which power is totally split—with one person having it and the other person not. The idea that the top is in control overlooks *her* vulnerability, including having to manage the risks involved. Similarly, the popular opinion that the bottom is ultimately the one in control, is not entirely accurate either; a lot hinges on how the top will manage the authority she’s been granted. When it comes to LC, control is never clearly in the purview of one party. Contrary to AC, LC requires that both the top and the bottom relinquish control; this entails vulnerability, some measure of trust, and of course, an asymmetrical kind of responsibility.

Consent in the Psychoanalytic Situation

Let us briefly note some parallels to the analytic situation (there are also many differences that I won’t go into). At the onset of a treatment the patient implicitly authorizes the analyst, giving her some power. Of course, the patient cannot possibly fully appreciate what it is that she is consenting to in entering analysis, or in beginning to recount dreams, emotions, sensations, etc. It is only as a result of the analysis that she may better appreciate what will have been stirred by the treatment, and what the transference will have brought. In that sense, the patient’s original consent in that respect is in large measure, naive. In different ways, the analyst too can’t know what she is consenting to when she agrees to start seeing a patient analytically. Despite her experience in conducting other analyses, and having been in one herself, she can’t anticipate how she will become unconsciously entangled with her patient or how her own infantile sexual will be kindled. The analyst, thus, offers an analysis to a patient sensitive to the constraints in the patient’s consent. And she also “accepts” a different set of constraints, which relate to the patient’s originally stated limits. Imagine a patient who wants to address relationship problems but announces that she won’t discuss her history of sexual abuse. The analyst accepts this condition, hoping that as the analytic work progresses this limit may shift. This is standard analytic practice; in most instances, it would be poor technique to even intimate to the patient that limits may shift in the course of the work. This is a simple illustration of why psychoanalytic work may not fall under the purview of informed consent, as “the informed exercise of choice,

and [the ability] to evaluate the options available and the risks attendant upon each”. It may be helpful to think of analytic treatments as proceeding along limit consent. The analyst’s decision-making is implicitly authorized by the patient; the skilled analyst registers her patient’s limits—explicitly stated and discerned through the analysand’s refusals, symptoms, and defenses—to inform her decisions as to when to persist and when to ease up. This is not a guarantor of good outcome, but if, as analysts, we let up when we feel the pushback of the patient’s discomfort, the work would stagnate. Sometimes we push, and when we do we have to bear our discomfort in evoking painful affects and memories; we do not know what will be evoked in the patient or in us and with what strength. Things can (and sometimes do) go off the rails. When Freud wrote that the analyst is “working with highly explosive forces,” (1915), a risk that, he insisted, must be engaged, tolerated, even dared, he was talking about erotic transferences per se; the risk pertains, though, not just to sexual content per se but the sexual in its economic sense, as having to do that is with the ‘sexual lining that courses through all psychic life’. In some high-octane moments the analyst has to resist the impulse to recoil. The analyst must take risks, knowing that if things go wrong the patient may be hurt, or the treatment may even end prematurely. These are considerable vulnerabilities for both parties. The vulnerability of the patient is the more important here and more obvious. But there are vulnerabilities for the analyst as well. It is never easy if the patient feels hurt or leaves treatment and in that sense the analyst is also vulnerable, though asymmetrically so. Remember that it is actually Imani and not Lumi who worries about things becoming “too much.” Ultimately, it is Imani’s responsibility, as it is the analyst’s, and not Lumi’s, or the analysand’s, to try to safeguard the other’s well being. And, also, to manage what gets agitated in her own self.

With all this talk of risk, I may be giving you the impression that safety has no role in LC. To the contrary. I think that if LC is to come into play at all, the relationship must feel safe enough. Lumi is able to ask Imani to not stop *because* they have a solid bond, and because Imani has been respectful of Lumi’s earlier limits. These are crucial preconditions to Lumi’s wanting to be pushed to the limit by Imani—and into this peculiar and unpredictable unsafety. In that sense, although both affirmative and limit consent hinge on being negotiated within the protective envelopments of safe relationships, safety plays different roles in each case. In AC, safety is about the top respecting and not violating the bottom’s expressed limits. For LC, safety is what

creates the conditions in the first place for someone to want a person they feel safe with to cross their limits. Of course, this does not guarantee the safety of what happens next; what happens next is unknown. Said differently, a safe relationship is what creates the “facilitative circumstances” that enable the top and the bottom to let each other become subject to the other, it is what allows the risk of future unsafety. LC involves high stakes, it invites liability and carries risk, whereas AC tries to eliminate it. Why step out of AC and into its limit counterpart? I think that for both the top and the bottom, the wish is driven by infantile sexuality’s economic tendency to work upward toward more stimulation, the “more and more” of experience. When pushed to its apex, this *more and more* can produce states of overwhelm which can, in t, as I’ll discuss, may catalyze significant psychic transformations.

Part II. Overwhelm: The Psychic Economy Of “More And More”

In the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* Freud famously proposing that the sexual drive is by nature polymorphous and perverse. What he wanted to do in talking about perversity was to stretch our understanding of the *sexual*, to suggest that it does not necessarily have to do with reproduction or with the difference between the sexes (Laplanche 2000). Perversity was not a deviation but sexuality’s very foundation. But Freud was nothing if not ambivalent about the relationship between infantile sexuality and the more civilized, sexual instinct which arises with the transformations of puberty. He returned to this in discussing sexual tension; the feeling of sexual tension he argued produces unpleasure; and yet sexual tension is undoubtedly, in itself pleasurable. He resolved this confusing uncertainty by proposing that there are, in fact, two sexual registers; in the first, the buildup of tension is pleasurable; in the second, unpleasurable. He called the pleasurable one forepleasure, and argued that it is the domain of infantile sexuality; whereas in the domain of mature sexuality, the buildup produces unpleasure, to be released through discharge/orgasm.

For Laplanche these are not contradictory regimes; they have to do with how sexuality develops. He agreed that the sexual instinct arriving in puberty is innate, biological, adaptational. It aims to bind, to works toward synthesis, inciting actions that quell tension, like orgasm. But, he insisted, “when the sexual instinct arrives” in puberty it finds its “seat already occupied” by the sexual drive, which has been there all along. Once the two meet they become inseparable,

they will always partake of each other-and this is what we call sexuality. But what is this sexual drive that precedes pubertal, instinctive sexuality? For Laplanche it is not innate but forms through experience; and contrary to instinctual sexuality it does not want to be quelled, it wants to keep going, escalating even to “the point of complete exhaustion”. Where does it come from? It comes to us through the “intervention of the other”, that is from the excess and surcharge of conscious messages that the adult directs to the child. This surcharge slips in like a “stowaway passenger” compromising, as Laplanche puts it, the consciously intended message making it enigmatic. The infant is propelled to make meaning of enigmatic messages by generating, for example, a fantasy (Scarfone 2017), a process that he called *translation*. But because the excess charge of the parent’s message is unconscious *to the parent*, the infant’s translation never amounts to accurately interpreting those messages; it is only an attempt to cope with the strain produced by enigma. Further, this translational process is always incomplete. What is untranslated becomes repressed, constituting the unconscious, which for Laplanche is also the infantile sexual. The infantile sexual constantly presses for translation, and this is what makes up the sexual drive. Because Laplanche thought that the process of translation can never be exhausted (the meaning of enigma can never be pinned down), the sexual drive is never sated, is always pressing for more-which accounts for its driven quality.

There is one more dimension of sexuality that should concern us here. Laplanche argued that we are mistaken to subsume the sexual drives under the rubric of self preservation or adaptation. The theory of narcissism and later object relations, moved analytic theorizing to conceiving of Eros as a less fierce concept than it originally was; Eros is now thought of to be organized homeostatically, its job being to bind, to relate and to connect. This conception of the sexual drive obscured sexuality’s inherent “destructive and destabilizing” properties, taming and domesticating the sexual. This is how, for Laplanche, we ended up with the need for the concept of a death drive; the fragmenting and destabilizing qualities of the sexual (no longer properties of Eros) would need to be relocated, ergo, the death drive. Laplanche thought that this pacification of the sexual was wrong; to him a polarity between sexuality and aggression made no sense to the sexual always involves “the *sexual drives* of death and the *sexual drives* of life” (2015).

Laplanche’s reading helps us see how thinking about sexuality as a function of a pacified ego paved the way for sexuality to become exclusively nested within object relation. As Dimen

has noted, this would eventually become a problem for psychoanalysis; to this day, it's difficult to talk about the driven quality of sexuality without immediately collapsing it into the quality of the object relations of the people involved in it. What this means clinically is that it has become hard to think about how pain and suffering mix with sexual pleasure except through pathology. This mixing is nowadays seen as a symptom that requires explanation. When we encounter excessive sexual states in our patients, or sexualities that blend pain and/or humiliation with pleasure, we usually see them as defensive sexualizations of early psychic trauma, as suggesting problems in object relating, or as efforts to cope with parental overstimulation.

Into Overwhelm

Laplanche retained the irreverent properties of the infantile sexual as part of the sexual. But he did not explore what psychic states we might expect to encounter when the sexual drive's appetite for stimulation is followed to its buildup. If we do not accept the defanging of sexuality, and if sexuality always includes binding properties (the sexual drives of life) and unbinding properties (the sexual drives of death), following the sexual drive's escalation does not necessarily mean that we are in the province of trauma or self-destructiveness. Said differently, a frenzied sexual economy isn't necessarily the working of the death drive, nor does it have to imply trauma or pathology. And yet, since it also draws from the sexual death drive, it can involve a certain risk of harm.

I call the psychic space we reach if we follow the sexual drive into the "more and more" of experience, *overwhelm*. Overwhelm does not arise from trauma, or self-destructiveness; and yet, since it comes about through the synergy of the sexual life drive and the sexual death drive it involves a certain degree of risk, the risk of crossing into unsafety, where things can go off the rails. This, we might guess, could be why Imani might hesitate to participate in the new game: pushing past Lumi's limits could get overstimulating or even traumatic. But if this happened, it would be not because of Imani's dynamics, but due to the nature of the sexual drive.

The Shattering of the Ego: Radical Unbinding through Overwhelm

In overwhelm tension builds beyond the pleasure principle; in that domain pleasure is

something we suffer. If (and this is a big if, with significant technical implications) this buildup becomes so much that it reaches past the brink, overwhelm can threaten the ego's coherence bringing about the shattering of the ego (Bersani). The ego's shattering occurs when a certain threshold of intensity is surpassed, producing sensations or affective processes that go beyond psychic organization. To a psychoanalyst, this is a frightening prospect as it recalls disorganized states or psychotic processes. So I want to linger on this to explore what ego shattering can mean analytically. Ego shattering shares key features with Laplanche's notion of the unbinding of the ego (1999b); the ego's unbinding unweaves previous translations, previous established fantasies that is, stripping enigma bare. This is an intermediate and short-lived condition, a condition where enigma is untethered to signifiers; it is a condition outside psychic representation where language breaks apart and experience is no longer communicable. Overwhelm can deliver the subject to these states of radical unbinding, disturbing the psyche, and disorganizing accustomed ways of being. This is as unmediated as the drive can be and as such, it is disorganizing. Unbinding is a fleeting condition; it quickly gives way, yielding to repression or to becoming bound in new translations, enabling the crafting of new translations. When unbinding happens, psychoanalytic treatments can offer the conditions for freed-up enigma to not get re-repressed but to become restitched into something new.

Part III. Clinical Material And Technical Implication

Isabela was in her mid-thirties when she started a four-times-weekly analysis. Her professional and social world were rich and exciting but in our sessions she was private, and remote. Over time I learned that she had grown up in a working-class family that came to the US for "a chance at a better life"; her parents had had much difficulty adjusting to the new culture and suffered a melancholia of voluntary displacement that saturated her childhood. Isabela was transfixed by their magnificent pain and nostalgia, which she felt she could not fully grasp. Most of this had been communicated to me as data, as if without deeper meaning. As you can imagine the work was protracted and the progress slow. Against these affective grays, Isabela's relationship with her lover, Raven, stood out in technicolor. Isabela identified as queer and as a pervert. She used the latter word not in its usual disparaging connotations but in keeping with how some queer communities try to reclaim pathologized meanings to articulate sexual and gendered possibilities/build communal ties. In psychoanalysis it's a difficult term with a terrible history

around the pathologizing of homosexuality; but I want to use it because it captures an edge, the blend of pain, pleasure and anguish, that neutral descriptors like “non- normative sexual practices” do not. Further, I find that phrases like “erotic games” and “sexual play” are problematic because they rely on the relationship in which the acts occur to make transgressive sex occurs palatable, usually heterosexual and marital. Last, phrases like ‘sexual play’ rely on AC (“any consensual encounter is ok”), when perversity may draw more on LC.

Isabela and Raven engaged regularly in elaborately planned, carefully scripted sexual encounters; Isabela pushed Raven’s (and her own) boundaries over a period of time, a process that required -and yielded- a deep knowing of each other. A few years into our work, Isabela recounted a sexual experience that proved consequential and as such, I will describe it in detail-

Isabela led Raven into a dimly lit room, and had her remove her clothing. She blindfolded Raven, placed leather restraints on her wrists, and tied her hands behind her back. Isabela then carefully threaded a hypodermic needle through Raven’s skin. She started below the collarbone, proceeding symmetrically with more needles all the way down to her thigh on both sides of Raven’s body. Isabela then removed her own clothing. Standing naked across Raven, she began piercing similarly her own skin. After she was done, she threaded an elastic thread through the corresponding needles in hers and her lover’s bodies. She then removed Raven’s blindfold. Raven looked down to take in the intricate bondage. Isabela ordered her to hold her gaze. With their eyes locked, she took a gentle step back, causing the strings to become taut. Stretched, they pulled on their skins, bringing about a painful sensation. Isabela’s skin hurt and so did Raven’s. Alert to her lover’s body, she wanted the intensity to mount, but not get out of hand. Slowly moving her body further away from Raven’s, Isabela began intensifying the pull on the strings. The amplification of the experience combined with the intense eye contact felt intoxicating to her. She was awash in a dysregulating experience, an oversaturation and told me she felt that she was coming undone, that she was being ripped apart and “broken open” by experience.

In the session, Isabela explained this scene as an offering to Raven. Raven had been physically abused as a child and by threading her body onto her lover’s, Isabela wanted to offer Raven a symbolic recognition of what Raven had suffered-and to restate her commitment to remaining tied to her despite their struggles. She told me that since trauma had entered Raven

through her body, her (Isabela's) message had to be embodied-not mediated through words; but Isabela had nothing to say about what this meant for her. The encounter produced a deepened level of intimacy between the two women that sustained through their relationship. During the time of the encounter, it involved a surge of high-voltage sensations and Isabela mentioned to me that when she had felt broken open she had a strong, albeit fleeting, sensation. She had trouble describing it; it felt inchoate, incommunicable. Eventually, struggling for words she said it felt like "a smell and a taste, a burning bitterness, like a burning."

In the hour before I was to see Isabela again, I found myself unexpectedly craving Greek coffee and fixed myself a cup. The timing was unusual; I usually have these cravings when I am freshly back in NY New York returning from my annual summer trip to Greece- but I barely gave it a thought. When Isabela entered my office, her demeanor immediately changed. After a long pause, she asked about the smell in the room. She could not identify it and struggled for words in a way that recalled her difficulty describing her fleeting sensory experience in our last session. Then, as she was reaching for language, it was like a hole opened up between us. It was unexpected, inexplicable. Isabela became distressed. She began to cry which was highly unusual, and soon she was weeping. This was unfolding very fast. I didn't know what to think. It felt that Isabela (and I) were tipping into the void. She was now sobbing, her breathing syncopated. I wanted to ground myself, to understand, but this was not a moment for "understanding." We were not in the land of represented meanings; what was happening felt emergent, not yet signified. I felt that I should let this unfold as if speaking would interrupt something, though I had no idea what. I wondered if she could bear my silence; or if I could. Slowly, Isabela stopped sobbing. We sat quiet, astonished, in shared speechlessness. She left upset, not looking at me.

I had heard much and often about my patient's sexual practices, some of which had entailed a degree of risk. Spontaneously, Isabela would assure me about Raven's and her own safety. I felt confident that Isabela was not self-destructive or reckless. I did not try to engage her in learning more about what these behaviors might be about, and I did not ask her questions about their meanings or try to make links. This is not to say that I did not think that there was represented material to which we could turn, or that there were no genetic links to be made-to the contrary, some felt obvious, almost begging interpretation. But I sensed that questions would invite her to order her material before it had a chance to fully form. Such interventions would

foreground formed psychic elements, diverting an unfolding process of more elusive psychic material, as if I were impatiently fishing out of the water an oyster that is still organizing its process around a grain of sand. The analyst's task, Laplanche insists, is not to synthesize or make meaning for the patient. It is the analyst who should be the hermeneut, who interprets. With Isabela I took this a step further; not only did I refrain from interpreting in this moment but, in not interpreting, I facilitated the build up toward her own unbinding, the shattering of her ego. To do so, the analyst has to guard against her own fear in the countertransference, to refrain from interpreting as a way of binding for herself-which could, in turn, disrupt the patient gathering momentum toward a state of overwhelm. For good reason, our attention is oftentimes on the worry that the patient will go too far and become overwhelmed; but sometime it might be better placed on attending to our resistances (and the patient's) to not going far enough. Such a stance is not without risk. With Isabela, I could not be certain that things would turn out well. In sitting with her while she was coming undone, both of us were accosted by the charge and inexplicability of something that was beyond our reach, I worried this might be too much for her.

Isabela started our next session with a memory. Her mother, whom she idealized, had raised Isabela and her sister with considerable anxiety that poverty, immigration, and racial otherness would substantially constrain their lives. The anxiety was realistic given the reign of white supremacy, prejudicial views against immigrants, and the limits to dignified access to resources. Her mother had worked diligently to impart on her children the skills they would need to navigate life in the U.S. Her hopes for a good life for her daughters took many forms one of which was the fantasy that learning how to play the piano might place them in the right circles and improve Isabela's marriage prospects. To pay for private lessons she took a second job involving arduous, painful manual labor. Isabela described the piano lessons. Upon walking into the teacher's home, she would be presented with a cup of coffee, a tradition common in their culture. She experienced the freshly prepared, hot coffee not as an offering, but as a demand: the lesson would not start until she drank it. Delaying was a waste of her mother's hard earned money, so Isabela would hastily gulp down the coffee. The sensation made her tear with pain, reminding me her description: "a smell and a taste, a kind of burning bitterness, like a burning."

Throughout our work, Isabela had always spoken idealizingly about her mother's work ethic, feeling undeserving of her mother's suffering, of the sacrifice of immigration, and of her

arduous labor. Isabela's complex gender, her queer sexuality, her passion for intellectual work, none of these were legible to her mother, would never fulfil her hopes for Isabela. But now, in thinking through the coffee ritual, Isabela came to wonder if the mother's own history was more fraught than she'd known, if her pained relationship to work and class arose only upon moving to the U.S., etc. These questions did not rush in to replace her sense of her parents' difficulties as people with limited resources and who were subject to racism and discrimination; but they did further nuance her thinking about her mother. Isabela's idealization softened, and with that more new thoughts emerged. We understood those not as truth or as memories that returned, but as novel translations that gave her new ways of understanding her life. Slowly, her relationship to her race and heritage, her gender, and her sexuality came to feel as belonging more to her.

Working with Overwhelm

Enigma, as a response to the parent's sexual unconscious, has no content per se that might be "uncovered", it is either translated or repressed. Isabela's ineffable sensation can be thought of as an underdeveloped, rudimentary form that enigma took during the rupture of her ego—the overwhelm reached by her ego and which caused the rupture of her ego/breaking down of translations. For enigma to become further elaborated, however, it had to borrow a transient form from elsewhere. Where did this form come from? I would say that it came from me, from my own psychic process. Isabela's recounting of her sexual experience, of her coming undone, and of the vague bitter/hot sensation seems to have agitated something related to my own infantile sexual, to have produced a "generative turbulence" (Civitaresse, 2013) in me that connects to my oddly timed making of the coffee. For me, Greek coffee has an excess of meaning. It is a signifier of a country I have partly lost through immigration. At the particular time of this work, Greece was going through its severe economic crisis, a crisis precipitously unraveling the social fabric. During this time children were fainting in schools from hunger, people were losing their homes, there was a surge in suicide rates. A skyrocketing of virulent, nationalist sentiment culminated in the election of a neo-Nazi party in parliament; it led to the setting up of blood banks and soup kitchens exclusively serving Greek citizens. I was as brokenhearted as I was enraged by this unfolding disaster. All of this manifestly alarming but highly represented material, I have to assume, was subtended by less represented, more enigmatic matter of my own—the content of which is beyond my scope here. But the point I am

trying to make is that the coffee I prepared was both meaningful (for me) and had certain effects on the Isabela. I am not suggesting that my urge to make this coffee arose through some form of unconscious communication from Isabela. That is, I don't think I made the coffee because I picked up on some element of her memory of the coffee ritual in the piano lessons. Rather, the signifier of Greek coffee is something that I brought to the analytic exchange; it is a production of my own unconscious life and it reflects my own response to the patient's material- a response that was, at once, serendipitous and meaningful. That response lent to my patient a form for her weakly represented enigma to become elaborated, activating her own memory of the coffee offering and the piano lessons. The Greek coffee that I made, that is, derived its meaning from its retroactive effect (apres-coup) on my patient's memory.

In the session overwhelm and the ego shattering it produced manifested in the void that opened up between Isabela and me, dysregulating both my patient and myself. Dysregulation is not an indication that something was going wrong, but that something was going on, that something is in process. When we are in the domain of the infantile sexual, dysregulation will unsettle the analyst; but it is no less a phenomenon of the analytic work than say, the transference. At such moments, the analyst will feel the press of wanting to bind and make meaning. This should be avoided because it can disrupt the gathering of momentum that may facilitate the unbinding of the ego. Avoiding binding will not be easy, especially so in working with perverse sexual material, when the analyst's own sexuality in all its primitiveness and excitements may get evoked. With such material the analyst may become especially fearful, or defensively transfixed in the descriptive poignancy of the sexual scenarios described by the patient. This is not to say that the scenarios enacted may not have elements that can be mined for meaning or that the analyst's conscious countertransferential responses may not themselves carry useful information/communications. It is only to say that a focus on symbolic meanings will not be as useful in working with material that is not psychically organized. Focusing the work toward uncovering meaning will disrupt the buildup to the ego's radical unbinding. We may recall here Stein's urge that "patients who are able to harness the excessive in sexuality in liberating ways should be listened to us as analysts with as much receptivity as we can muster, knowing that however attentively we try to capture that excess, we cannot do so conclusively."

Working with overwhelm will agitate the patient's *and* the analyst's infantile sexual. In this case, my making of the coffee, excited my patient's earlier mnemonic traces in the après-coup. Actions of this sort are akin to acts of figurability (Botella and Botella 2005, 2013; Levine, 2012). Taking up the retroactive memories these evoked in the analysis helped ensure that the enigma that got freed up in the unbinding of the ego did not get repressed, giving it room to become retranslated by the patient. Isabela's new translations made more degrees of psychic freedom possible for her, enabling her to thread re-translations of her race, heritage and gender with her own meanings. A self with greater agency and freedom became possible to Isabela through the work of overwhelm.

It is important to be clear that by speaking of freedom I do not mean to imply some greater access to a "true" self or "real" access to one's interiority. Speaking of access or truth makes little sense since enigma is not about recuperating some primal memory, or an unconsciously transmitted historical truth. What becomes available to the patient through this process is always—and only—a new translation. New translations are no more definitive or "true" than the earlier, unraveled ones; they are equally subject to being broken down and to being stitched together just like the earlier version. What is at stake here is not a "final destination" as far as translation is concerned, but how well a translation works at a particular point in the patient's life. To put it differently, the promise of overwhelm is not the discovery of a genuine self, neither does it offer repair or "liberation." What materialized through my process with Isabela does not capture anything with historical accuracy; that is, Isabela did not "discover" the mother's ambivalence, racial trauma, or class injury—though these may well be there. What Isabela was able to do was craft a way for her class, her race, her gender, and her queer sexuality to become more hers, to be less answerable to the meanings and anxieties it generated in the other, and to bring them more into her own possession.

This what analytic work on the limit, work that hinges on limit consent and that may produce overwhelm, can offer: not making the unconscious conscious, but a transport towards psychic transformation.