MASOCHISM IS A powerful diagnostic tool. Usually understood as the desire to abdicate control in exchange for sensation—pleasure, pain, or a combination thereof—it is a site where bodies, power, and society come together in multiple ways. It can signal powerlessness, domination, or ambivalence depending on one’s point of view. As such, masochism allows us to probe different ways of experiencing power. Masochism’s rich analytic possibilities stem from its ability to speak across theory and practice, disciplines, and identities. Indeed, masochism’s plasticity is my jumping-off point for this book. Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism brings together a divergent set of debates, historical actors, and theorists under the sign of masochism to reveal the sensations that become attached to difference.

Sensations are fundamentally subjective; they are a condition of existing in a body and are present in more permutations than there are living beings. They are the embodiments of difference. Yet sensations are also the tools that we have for making sense of the world; in this way sensation has an external dimension. Sensation resides at the border of reality and consciousness. It marks the body’s existence as a perceiving subject and the world’s existence as an object to be perceived, and it serves as the basis for experience. Thus I suggest that sensation is an important critical term because it undercuts the identitarian dimensions of experience. If we conceive of experience as the narrative that consciousness imposes on a collection of sensations, sensation provides a way for us to explore corporeality without reifying identity. Here, however, an immediate question arises: If sensation is such an individual concept, how can it be useful as an analytic term? Though sensation can be fully understood individually, we can think of it as occupying certain forms because of its externality. This externality allows us to think about sensation as inhabiting particular forms with a shared (and some might say learned) assumption of the boundaries of each particular category. Though the sensations that I describe in this book are more complex than this, I
will use the color blue as an example of what I am talking about. While you and I may perceive the color differently, the fact that we assume that we are experiencing a shared referent allows us to imagine that the color occupies a particular form that is both multiple (we each experience it differently) and singular (we both also experience it as distinct from other colors). This structural aspect of sensation is what gives it its analytic purchase. Sensation is then both individual and impersonal; it occupies a sphere of multiplicity without being tethered to identity.

Given that masochism is about the relationship between sensation and power, it offers a distinct lens for theorizing the ways that difference is embodied. Further, masochism is compelling because it always seems to be in the midst of a critical moment. It was an important term for fin de siècle sexologists, early twentieth-century psychoanalysts, mid-twentieth-century theorists of decolonization, existential philosophers, feminists in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and queer theorists of the 1990s. Masochism means different things to different people at different times and in different disciplines. I take masochism to be a mobile entity; its meaning is always local and contingent, dependent on the speaker and his or her philosophy and worldview. What emerges from thinking about masochism this way is not a portrait of power or sexuality in the modern age but rather a continued fascination with questions of agency, subjectivity, and difference.

*Sensational Flesh*’s reach extends from fin de siècle Austria to midcentury France and concludes in the early twenty-first-century United States. In that space, I will examine various notions of masochism at work. What begins as a literarily influenced sexual practice morphs into a universal aspect of subjectivity, a way to describe a type of relationship between self and other, a subversive mode of desubjectification or resistance to dominant forms of power, and finally a privileged mode of personhood. I have woven together these particular threads of masochism because they illuminate issues of agency, freedom, representation, and experience. Masochism is important not for its essence but because it exists as a set of relations among individuals and between individuals and structures. This mobility makes it a useful analytic tool; an understanding of what someone means by masochism lays bare concepts of race, gender, power, and subjectivity. Importantly, these issues converge on the question of what it feels like to be enmeshed in various regimes of power.

In order to really understand what is at stake in masochism, I suggest we theorize the structures of sensation underlying these performances
of submission. In this way, we can attend to the question of flesh and difference. While avoiding edging toward one or several essences of masochism, these structures of sensation move us closer to theorizing embodiment and difference and what it feels like to exist in the space between agency and subjectlessness. In its quest to center the flesh, *Sensational Flesh* produces a counternarrative to that which defines masochism not as a diagnostic space but as an exceptional practice linked to subversive politics. Though I argue that masochism is always politically charged, I caution against always reading it as a subversive practice. By working around the collapse between masochism and subversion, this book explores the territory in between, the space where bodies are embedded in power.

The history of masochism’s association with subversion is important, however, because it allows us to see not only why masochism has had such critical purchase but also what gets elided in that collapse—namely questions of difference. While this introduction explores masochism’s link with the subversive, the remainder of the book foregrounds other sensational orbits by resurrecting other bodies and histories that are also animated by masochism. Difference and sensation come together to perform a queer of color critique.

**An Exceptional Practice: Masochism, Sexuality, and Subversion**

I fancied that I was a prisoner and absolutely in a woman’s power, and that this woman used her power to hurt and abuse me in every way possible. In this, whipping and blows played an important part in my fancy, and there were many other acts and situations which all expressed the condition of vassalage and subjection. I saw myself constantly kneeling before my ideal, trod upon, loaded with chains, and imprisoned. Severe punishments of all kinds were inflicted on me, to test my obedience and please my mistress. The more severely I was humiliated and abused, the more I indulged in these thoughts.²

These are the confessions of the “first” masochist, an anonymous man who described his sexual practices in a manuscript that he sent to Dr. Richard von Krafft-Ebing, an eminent psychiatrist in Graz, for inclusion in *Psychopathia Sexualis*, Krafft-Ebing’s compendium of sexual disorders, in the hopes of enlightening the scientific community about masochism,
a term that he invented as an homage to Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s Venus in Furs. In 1890, this man was rewarded for his efforts by becoming case 9 in the sixth edition of Psychopathia Sexualis, Neue Forschungen auf dem Gebiet der Psychopathia Sexualis. His inclusion reoriented Krafft-Ebing’s theory of sexuality by introducing the psychiatric community to masochism and making it one of the fundamental disorders of sexual desire. Masochism, according to Krafft-Ebing, was about submission. He considered it a feminization of man’s sexual rôle, a perversion that was characterized by passivity and subjection. As a diagnostic category, masochism’s “essential element” was “the feeling of subjection to the woman.”

I begin with this narrative not only because it marks masochism’s first foray into scientific literature but because it also inaugurates its connection to the subversive. Historicizing the trajectory of reading masochism as exceptional—in the sense of “unusual” and in the sense of something that “gestures to narratives of excellence”—exposes the political potency of subversion and the assumptions and silences about bodies, race, and gender that undergird this exceptionalism. This history of exceptionalism, which takes us from Krafft-Ebing through Sigmund Freud, Michel Foucault, Leo Bersani, Lee Edelman, and contemporary queer theory, allows us to begin to understand how masochism functions as an embodied form of social critique and simultaneously how its performative inversions can serve to reinforce the status quo. Further, linking subversion and exceptionalism entails discerning what is deemed subversive for these contexts and how masochism fits into that picture. This means examining different ideologies surrounding sexuality, politics, and pathology.

For Krafft-Ebing, the most compelling aspect of this man’s narrative was his explicit desire to invert the conventional social order and submit to a woman. Krafft-Ebing could not understand why men would want to be powerless. The masochist’s desire to invert norms and abdicate agency was not only irrational but pathological in the context of nineteenth-century Austria. Masculine submission threatened to upend established social order by placing women in positions of power. Against a backdrop of fears of feminism, lesbianism, and female empowerment, the masochist became a visible symptom of the declining state of manliness and masculinity.

We see evidence of this transgression in case 9’s narrative through the liberal use of the passive voice. He is “trod upon, loaded with chains, and
imprisoned.” Here, the passive voice marks his submission. Literally, he willingly abdicates his agency, but this maneuver is not without complication. The fantasy is enacted so as to focus on his pleasure—both voyeuristic (“I see myself”) and sensational—denying agency to his mistress. In describing practices of self-annihilation, he reifies the self, and not just any self, but an agential masculine self. This is submission of a particular type. Here we begin to understand why, despite being articulated as a practice in which one becomes feminized, Krafft-Ebing’s formulation of masochism produced a gap between feminization and femininity. Women, though described as passive and lacking in agency, were not usually considered masochists. The naturalization of submission in women made it difficult for psychiatrists to imagine a separate category of female masochists. Symptoms of masochism in men were classified as normal behavior in women; Krafft-Ebing writes that “in woman, an inclination to subordination to man is to a certain extent a normal manifestation.”

This gendering made female masochism natural and hid female masochists. Female masochists became legible to Krafft-Ebing only through a masculinization of their desires. One way of accomplishing this was by articulating a cross-gender desire. For example, case 70 in the eighth edition of *Psychopathia Sexualis* expressed her wish to be a male slave rather than a female one because “every woman can be the slave of her husband.” She further described herself as “otherwise proud and quite indomitable, whence it arises that I think as a man (who is by nature proud and superior).” Her fantasies of transgressing the boundaries of femininity marked her desire to be whipped as masculine, which rendered her legible as a masochist. This woman’s agency, expressed most markedly in her wish for its absence, was a mark of masculinity. It was the female masochist’s overt sexuality, however, that was her most masculine attribute. Physicians and social theorists considered displays of autonomous female sexuality threatening for a variety of reasons. They hinted at independence from men and the potential participation in a sexual underworld of lesbianism, masturbation, and miscegenation.

While Krafft-Ebing viewed this willful stance of exceptionalism as a sign of pathology and perversion, it is easy to see how this practice could be rescripted as subversive in that it flew against prevailing societal norms. Indeed, this is the type of reading practice that I argue takes place first with Freud, then with Foucault, and then with Bersani and Edelman. One of the things that I want to emphasize, however, is how
focusing on this element of masochism erases the other sensations that are at work. In his original description of masochism, the author of case 9 links his practices and fantasies of subjection with *Venus in Furs*’ lush tableaux of domination, providing submission with texture. By doing this, he marks masochism as a fantasy, a practice, an aesthetic category, and a physical sensation. Throughout this book, I seek to reinvigorate these other ways of reading masochism, particularly because reading it as exceptional reifies norms of whiteness and masculinity and suppresses other modes of reading power, agency, and experience.

In Freud’s theoretical renegotiation of sexuality, there is no place for Krafft-Ebing’s masochist. Freud’s theory of sexuality, which is grounded in infantile pleasure, changes the landscape of what can be considered a perversion and why. Using pleasure as a metric and infancy as a mechanism, Freud reclassifies perversions as neuroses and cites infantile experiences, rather than degeneration, as their cause. Though this shift away from degeneration and hereditarian notions of perversion could serve to quell rampant anti-Semitism by portraying Jews (and indeed other ethnicities) as not pathological, the most radical shift in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* is the move away from the paradigm of perversion toward that of neurosis. For Freud, all perversions can be attributed to arrested infantile development; instead of being the norm, heterosexuality is the culmination of a difficult developmental process. Thinking about perversions as developmental rather than hereditary, coupled with understanding that heterosexuality is an accomplishment rather than a given, radically alters the schema of studies on sexuality. Instead of merely focusing on perversions, they give attention to the mechanism behind “normalcy.” What is “dominant” is placed under the microscope, and what could be considered perverse is no longer part of a binary but one end of a spectrum; space “outside” of pathology ceases to exist. This renders attempts at marking the exceptional difficult. Furthermore, after dismissing hereditarian arguments for pathology, Freud argues that this spectrum of sexual “normalcy” is socially relative. What some societies have judged to be abnormal is prized in other societies; more importantly, some societal rules have repressed normal sexual impulses, relegating them to the unconscious and causing neurosis. In a reading that again serves to highlight the specter of complicity, Freud argues that society produces what it pathologizes.

In *Three Essays*, Freud transforms sexuality from a contained system that operates according to the binary of pervert/citizen into the ground
for society and civilization. In displacing the pervert, the neurotic becomes simultaneously universal (everyone is vulnerable to repressed desires) and hidden. Despite the visibility of some symptoms, its true root remains in the unconscious. Importantly, this reorganization of pathology as invisible lays the groundwork for mapping both exception-alism and complicity onto a number of practices; the difference between the two comes down to a matter of framing.

Freud’s theoretical and methodological shift also works to reorient masochism. Rather than diagnose someone as a masochist, Freud looks for the presence or absence of masochistic desires. This difference exemplifies his modification of the concept; it is at once spatial (from external to internal), temporal (from present to past), and formal (social to instinctual). While Krafft-Ebing characterized the masochist as a performer attempting to invert social hierarchies in order to gain momentary pleasure from losing power, Freud argues that masochism is a product of polymorphous perversion and mixed-up instincts. In describing its etiology, he writes: “Ever since Jean Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions*, it has been well known to all educationalists that the painful stimulation of the skin of the buttocks is one of the erotogenic roots of the passive instinct of cruelty (masochism).” This statement, which focuses on the experience of being beaten, differs markedly from Krafft-Ebing’s analysis of Rousseau’s condition, which dwells on Rousseau’s desire, as a child, to be punished by his domineering schoolmistress. The schoolmistress is absent in his story; the most important element is the stimulation of the buttocks. Krafft-Ebing would term this flagellation, but Freud sees this as emblematic of a deeper merging of pain and pleasure. It is not mere “nerve irritation” but symptomatic of an unconscious association of physical pain with pleasure, a type of internal confusion that leads some adults to seek punishment in order to achieve physical excitation.

Freud’s use of the infant’s confusion of pleasure and pain as an explanation for sadism and masochism foregrounds the work of the unconscious. Since Freud conceives of pain in opposition to pleasure, masochism is particularly aberrant in his libidinally infused schema: Why would one seek pain? Freud’s only response is to imagine that the instincts are confused so that what is painful actually registers as pleasure. Eventually this problematization of pleasure grows into three distinct types of masochism: erotogenic, feminine, and moral. Freud defines erotogenic masochism as receiving pleasure from physical pain.
and feminine masochism as a practice that relies on the fantasy of submission in which male actors gain pleasure due to the adoption of the feminine role and the performance of submission. Moral masochism is an entirely new entity; it is an unconscious desire for punishment that manifests itself clinically as almost paralyzing feelings of guilt.

Freud’s reworking of masochism transforms it into a way to describe what is essential about life, namely, negativity in the form of guilt, shame, and a desire for death. Freud’s characterization of life as unstable, chaotic, and yet driven toward stillness, a struggle that is overtly manifest in masochism, is at odds with Krafft-Ebing’s vision of a world that preserves autonomy and social hierarchies (keeping women and non-Germanic ethnicities at the bottom). Freud disrupts the concept of autonomy first by positing the unconscious and then by positing an unconscious drive toward death and pain. This replacement of order with chaos allows masochism to be read on myriad levels. It plays both to narratives of exceptionalism and to those of complicity and normalization. By this I mean that it is at once a marginal perversion and a necessary universality; it plays on axes of ethnicity and gender, but it is also beyond these categories; and it challenges autonomy as much as it negates its very possibility.

Though Foucault’s use of S&M to articulate both individual freedom and communal resistance has been empowering for queer theorists, his insistence on difference from previous formulations of masochism occludes the similarity between his theorization of S&M and Freud’s. For both, masochism acts as a space of social critique; in Freud this manifests as guilt and shame, while Foucault imagines the production of new pleasures.

In *The Will to Knowledge*, Foucault famously argues that one might be able to “counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures, and knowledges, in their multiplicity and their possibility of resistance.” Bodies and pleasures, Foucault argues, run counter to sex-desire. By this, he suggests thinking of pleasure as something separate from a psychoanalytic ethos of lack and the reproductive imperative that has governed sex. Pleasure, which can be “evaluated in terms of its intensity, its specific quality, its duration, its reverberations in the body and the soul,” offers a frame for thinking about embodiment that exceeds the disciplinary regimes that define modernity, therefore opening up different modes of theorizing resistance and power. Further, we can situate pleasure as one of the possible outcomes of the primary mode of
resistance that Foucault articulates in the second and third volumes of *History of Sexuality*, namely, technologies of the self or asceticism. Foucault argues that asceticism lies at the base of self-formation, ethics, and freedom. For Foucault, freedom is more than resistance; it is creativity and a particular type of relationship to the self and the other that is based on exceeding and subverting the disciplinary boundaries of the body. Freedom, I argue, in this instance is about opening possibilities for thinking about corporeality.

With this in mind, we can examine Foucault’s turn toward S&M, which he argues offers freedom because it is a practice in which subjects manipulate bodies and power relations in order to reconfigure their own relationships to pleasure. Foucault’s understanding of S&M is historically and geographically specific. In an interview, Bob Gallagher and Alexander Wilson press Foucault to discuss the impact of his work on gay liberation movements in North America. In gay history, 1982 was a year that contained the rosy residue of gay liberation’s political fervor, its ethos of sexual abandon, and the taint of anxiety related to Gay Related Immune Deficiency Disease (GRID), which would become known as AIDS after July 1982. The gay liberation movement, which was formed after the Stonewall Riots in 1969, succeeded in demedicalizing homosexuality by removing it from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1973; pushed for an agenda of skepticism toward psychiatry, government, and other institutions; and advocated promiscuity and the creation of a homosexual culture. In this moment before the event of AIDS, anxiety was building in American gay communities about the sudden illnesses and deaths of young men; it was not yet linked to sex or bodily fluids, but the perception of a “gay plague,” a punishment for homosexuality, was in the air. These undercurrents—the promise of gay liberation, the potential peril of homosexuality, and distrust of institutions like psychiatry, government, and the nation—lend the interview and Foucault’s comments on S&M a certain historicity. For example, while Foucault speaks of pleasure, experience, and sex as idyllic and without a mention of safety, the shadow of inadequate governmental response to the crisis looms—“Being homosexuals, we are in a struggle with the government.”17 Importantly, in a statement that will be echoed by later queer theorists, he is also invested in moving homosexuality away from an identity-based category toward a way of being. In response to a question regarding the needs of a gay movement, Foucault says:
What I meant was that I think what the gay movement needs now is much more the art of life than a science or scientific knowledge (or pseudoscientific knowledge) of what sexuality is. Sexuality is a part of our behavior. It’s a part of our world freedom. Sexuality is something that we ourselves create—it is our own creation, and much more than the discovery of a secret side of our desires. We have to understand that with our desires, through our desires, go new forms of relationships, new forms of love, new forms of creation. Sex is not a fatality: it’s a possibility for creative life. . . . We have to create a gay life. To become.\textsuperscript{18}

In articulating a desire to move away from the regulation produced by sexual categories, Foucault invokes asceticism and pleasure. He seeks a move toward thinking creatively about what bodies can do and the relationships that they can form when they are unimpeded by normativity. While this interview can be read as a comment on the fear and panic surrounding GRID and the later emergence of AIDS, we can also read it as a death knell for identity politics. One does not have to be immobilized by the idea that there is one way to have sex and to be gay; rather, bodies offer multiple possibilities for creativity.

In light of this, Foucault is asked about the “enormous proliferation in the last fifteen years of male homosexual practices: the sensualization, if you like, of neglected parts of the body and the articulation of new pleasures.”\textsuperscript{19} He responds by praising S&M as innovative because it allows for an alternate formation of subjectivity by offering new possibilities (separate from modernity’s sexual ethos of surveillance, discipline, and control) for being and relating to others. Foucault centers these possibilities on S&M’s innovative nongenital practices of pleasure:

[S&M] is the real creation of new possibilities of pleasure, which people had no idea about previously. . . . We know very well what all those people are doing is not aggressive; they are inventing new possibilities of pleasure with strange parts of their body—through the eroticization of the body. I think it’s a kind of creation, a creative enterprise which has as one of its main features what I call the desexualization of pleasure. The idea that bodily pleasure should always come from sexual pleasure as the root of all our possible pleasure—I think that’s something quite wrong. These practices are insisting that we can produce pleasure with very odd things, very strange parts of our bodies, in very unusual situations, and so on.\textsuperscript{20}
According to Foucault, the practice of S&M redraws the lines between pleasure and eroticism. *Scientia sexualis*, he argues, has privileged genitally based sexuality; S&M’s mobilization of a myriad of other body parts for pleasure turns eroticism into a nongenital, creative act. Foucault locates both resistance to a reproductive imperative and freedom in these continuous possibilities of creation and pleasure. In this schema, he posits pleasure and creativity against desire and violence. Desire, he argues, is mired in a psychoanalytic concept of lack and anticipation, while pleasure is marked by a temporality of the present. S&M reorganizes the body to emphasize pleasure rather than identity or discipline; it offers tangible corporeal freedom.

Another important side of S&M emerges in this interview. Beyond thinking about it solely as a practice of the self, Foucault regards it as a type of collectivity, a subculture. As a subculture, S&M is part of dominant society, but it offers a space for difference and possibilities for resistance and freedom by illuminating forms of organization outside of the heterosexual norm. Here, we must remember that Foucault understands S&M as an emergent sexual subculture, which arose as an alternative to 1950s homophile societies as a place for gay men to assert and play with their masculinity. Thinking about S&M as a subculture allows Foucault to imagine alternative kinship structures. Rather than being bound by reproduction, these men are linked through the collective practice of S&M. This subculture offers a space for difference and possibilities for resistance and freedom.

Foucault’s delight in the productive potential of S&M is palpable. At various points in the interview he describes S&M as “the use of a strategic relationship as a source of pleasure (physical pleasure),” “the real creation of new possibilities of pleasure,” and “the eroticization of power.” Underlying this sense of glee is a theory of S&M, a theory of its origins, practice, and ethics. Foucault’s S&M is a practice of eroticized manipulations of power involving bodies, pleasure, and pain between men or women. His interest in the eroticization of power signals, not only admiration for a sex practice that functions outside the reproductive imperative, but also a desire to think power in a new modality, to think about not just the power of eroticism but the eroticism of power.

Throughout, Foucault posits S&M as outside: outside of history, outside of current sexual norms and practices, and outside of normative social hierarchies. Given Foucault’s insistence on novelty, the pertinent question becomes—what ruptures does he envision as having taken
place? Classifying S&M as new marks this practice as different from earlier iterations of masochism; it allows us to read S&M as a practice that is suspended in the present, which offers insight into Foucault’s political and ethical sensibilities. By situating S&M as a sexual subculture within same-sex communities, Foucault attempts to align it with a logic that is separate from the reproductive ethos of modernity. In this utopian vision, pleasure is not genitally focused but located in every part of the body. This shift allows for a proliferation of pleasures and opens new possibilities for relations between bodies and people. In short, it creates a new ethics. In producing a narrative of emergence, however, Foucault truncates the history of S&M. He refuses to fold it into the institutional narratives of the history of sexuality and psychiatry. Both of these narratives heavily rely on society’s valorization of the concept of modernity, which encompasses the workings of biopower, surveillance, and individuality. Situating S&M against and outside of these regimes suggests hope for, or perhaps signals the birth of, a new episteme, an episteme that works on the level of the community and individual subjects.

Foucault allows us to ask—What does it mean to figure subversion as a bodily act when complicity is the general condition of subjectivity? In terms of Foucault’s specific attachment to S&M, we might also ask what possibilities this form of corporeal subversion might offer to those whose bodies might be read differently (because of differences in race, gender, able-bodiedness, etc.) in these dynamics of power exchange. While I think these are valid questions to ask of S&M, to some degree I wonder if they are triggered less by Foucault’s commitment to S&M, which he articulates in response to a query specifically about possibilities of freedom for gay men, and more by those who have read these statements as a blanket endorsement for S&M.

Masochism, Queer Theory, and Self-Annihilation

A few years after Foucault’s statements on S&M, pleasure, and subversion, AIDS reached the broader American consciousness. Though not formally acknowledged by President Ronald Reagan until 1987, the disease by then had a very public face. Because it first gained notice among gay men, AIDS was linked with homosexuality. This association refocused attention to the homosexual body as potentially pathological and disease ridden while simultaneously scripting homosexual desire,
especially among men, as dangerous and symptomatic of a death wish. Rather than being treated as a public health crisis, AIDS was framed as a matter of morality. AIDS, then, reoriented the public’s imagination with regard to sexuality, bodies, and pleasures. In 1988, Steven Seidman described some of these shifts:

AIDS has provided a pretext to reinsert homosexuality within a symbolic drama of pollution and purity. Conservatives have used AIDS to rehabilitate the notion of “the homosexual” as a polluted figure. AIDS is read as revealing the essence of a promiscuous homosexual desire and proof of its dangerous and subversive nature. The reverse side of this demonization of homosexuality is the purity of heterosexuality and the valorization of a monogamous, marital sexual ethic. . . . Liberal segments of the heterosexual media have, in the main, repudiated a politics aimed at the repression of homosexuality. Instead they have enlisted AIDS in their campaign to construct an image of the “respectable homosexual” and to legitimate a sexual ethic of monogamy and romance.

I have quoted extensively from Seidman because his statements underscore the degree to which AIDS permitted the villainization of homosexuality in the name of public health. Seidman argues that this backlash was already under way in response to a national feeling of “social crisis and decline” spurred by “an economic recession, political legitimacy problems stemming from Watergate, military setbacks in Vietnam and Iran, and social disturbances arising from the various civil rights, protest, and liberation movements.” Homosexuals, Seidman writes, were seen “as a public menace, as a threat to the family, and as imperiling the national security by promoting self-centered, hedonistic, and pacifist values.” If, as Seidman argues, AIDS provided the pretext around which sentiments of hostility coalesced, it also provided the impetus to rearticulate an ideology that placed monogamy and marriage at the center of a national morality. Since monogamy was framed as a matter of public health (despite the scientifically problematic nature of that equation), not adhering to those norms was scripted as a matter of personal failure and societal threat. What should have been read as a failure on the part of governments was treated as a matter of individual responsibility. Though Seidman does not use the term, this shift toward the individual, the private, and the moral clearly adheres to the logic of
neoliberalism. Likewise, the response of some gay men to produce an image of a “good” homosexual who is respectable because of his monogamy and therefore not a threat to the nation is one of the origin points of homonationalism.27

Against this focus on individual responsibility and private citizens, we have a different context for reading Foucault’s discussion of bodies and pleasures. This context gives Foucault’s argument that individuals can resist heteronormativity through pleasure a moral overtone of shame and disgust. According to this logic, individual pleasure is dangerous because it causes societal harm and personal destruction, and the AIDS crisis was produced not by the failures of various structures—such as health systems and governments—but by individual selfish pleasures. How, then, can we discuss individual pleasures and subversive technologies of the self when the individual rather than the structure is seen as the problem? This is the context where we truly see the emergence of masochism as exceptional and subversive because analytic attention rests on the individual as agent rather than as a component of a larger structure, as we saw with the disciplined subject or complicit psyche.

Leo Bersani begins to take up the question of the individual in his 1987 article “Is the Rectum a Grave?” The seminal article puts forth the argument that homophobia is connected to a “sacrosanct value of selfhood” that is threatened by “the self-shattering and solipsistic jouissance” of sexuality.28 Jouissance, here, is more than pleasure; it is, following Lacan, beyond pleasure and pain and beyond identity. Bersani argues that the anality of gay male sex “advertises the risk of the sexual itself as the risk of self-dismissal, of losing sight of the self, and in so doing it proposes and dangerously represents jouissance as a model of ascesis.”29 Here and in The Freudian Body, Bersani presents sexual practice and pleasure as a way outside of subjectivity. In the Freudian Body, Bersani writes, “Sexuality would be that which is intolerable to the structured self,” because, as he goes on to assert, “sexuality—at least in the mode in which it is constituted—could be thought of as a tautology for masochism.”30 It is from the vantage point of celebrating gay male sexuality as a mode of self-annihilation and exceptionalism that Bersani comes to his reading of Foucault on sadomasochism.

In Homos, Bersani elaborates on his statement that male homosexual desire is intimately connected to self-annihilation. Bersani draws on Foucault’s comments on sadomasochism to further politicize gay male sex by arguing that S&M, “partly as a result of the demonstration [it] is said to
provide of the power of the bottoms, or presumed slaves . . . [,] has helped to empower a position traditionally associated with female sexuality.”

S&M allows Bersani to argue (against Foucault’s other statements on friendship and homosexuality) that sex is where the radicality of homosexuality lies. For Bersani, “S/M raises, however crudely, important questions about the relation between pleasure and the exercise of power, and invites (in spite of itself) a psychoanalytic study of the defeat, or at least the modulation, of power by the very pleasure inherent in its exercise.”

Though he is drawing on Foucault, Bersani’s investment in sadomasochism hinges, not on its potential to create nongenital pleasure, but on its ability to connect pleasure, power, and self-annihilation. Further moving away from Foucault’s understanding of S&M, Bersani writes, “The most radical function of S/M . . . lies rather in the shocking revelation that, for the sake of . . . stimulation, human beings may be willing to give up control over their environment.”

Bersani’s interest in sadomasochism stems from its suggestion that the subject renounces his or her agency. The subject, understood, according to the tenets of liberalism, as rational and possessing agency, wants to relinquish his mastery. Since this is his hold on the world, it is equivalent to self-annihilation. Bersani also invites us to consider sadomasochism through the lens of psychoanalysis, which fuses desire and the death drive into self-annihilation. This is in contrast to Foucault’s understanding of S&M as a technology of the self. Bersani’s attachment to psychoanalysis, fraught as it may be, also preserves a focus on pleasure as the ultimate aim, which problematizes Foucault’s interest in S&M as a community formation even as it may lead to other considerations of alternate forms of relationality.

Bersani articulates a vision of sadomasochism as a form of “nonsuicidal disappearance of the subject,” arguing that the desire for masochism originates in the overwhelming sensations that greet newborns and infants. In turn, this understanding of masochism marks sexuality, in psychoanalytic terms, as “an aptitude for the defeat of power by pleasure, the human subject’s potential for a jouissance in which the subject is momentarily undone.” Following this logic, Bersani argues that jouissance is “self-shattering” in that it disrupts the ego’s coherence and dissolves its boundaries. Since sexuality is therefore inextricably tied to masochism and self-annihilation, Bersani argues that it can provide a way to conceive of subjectivity without identity.

Bersani is interested in sexuality and sadomasochism insofar as they offer modes of theorizing gay male subjectivity. Bersani’s investment
in the radicality of gay male sex in tandem with his understanding of sexuality as a masochistic, that is to say, self-shattering, enterprise leads him to argue that homosexual desire is rife with “anti-communitarian” impulses due to its “perverse” structures. In other words, he embraces the negative spin that conservatives placed on homosexuality in the wake of AIDS: that homosexuals were not interested in monogamy, becoming part of the normative community, or upholding the ideals of individuality. Bersani argues that these anticommmunitarian impulses are born from the homosexual investment in sameness (homo-ness), which he marks as a mode where there is not an investment in identity or the self. Bersani writes, “New reflections on homo-ness could lead us to a salutary devalorizing of difference—or, more exactly, to a notion of difference not as a trauma to be overcome (a view that, among other things, nourishes antagonistic relations between the sexes), but rather as a nonthreatening supplement to sameness.”

Bersani’s valorization of similarity over difference pushes him toward sadomasochism as a way of creating similarity through the annihilation of the ego. There are many ways that we can read Bersani and Foucault as articulating parallel claims about pleasure producing a way to exist outside of subjectivity. Foucault describes this as a space exterior to the disciplinary formations of subjectivity, while Bersani fixates on the shattering of the ego. Bersani’s use of psychoanalysis is a notable difference from Foucault, though Bersani reads Freud and Foucault as sharing a commitment to thinking pleasure outside of genital sexuality.

While not necessarily calling forth the clinical tradition that Foucault takes issue with, Bersani’s invocation of jouissance and self-shattering does announce the fact that he is talking about a different sort of subject and a different sort of masochism, even as the end results—pleasure and protest—are similar. While Foucault is intrigued by the possibilities of pleasure as an externality that the subject produces, Bersani is invested in the subject’s depth. That is to say, his masochism is the result of unconscious relations that evoke guilt, shame, and the desire for self-annihilation. Though this destruction of the ego occurs in protest against various regimes of normativity, it is still a subject governed by an interiority and as such enriches our ability to talk about relationality, temporality, and emotion within the framework of masochism, pleasure, and exception.

Within queer theory, others have taken up Bersani’s investment in the psychoanalytic subject and articulated the equation of queerness
with social disruption and exceptionalism even more forcefully. “Queerness,” Lee Edelman argues, “undoes the identities through which we experience ourselves as subjects, insisting on the Real of a jouissance that social reality and the futurism on which it relies have already foreclosed.” In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* Edelman links the queer disruption of normative narratives to the death drive. For Edelman the death drive, as “the articulable surplus that dismantles the subject from within, . . . names what the queer, in the order of the social, is called forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every form of social viability.” Although Edelman does not name it this, we might, following Freud, consider this internal drive toward social death a form of masochism. In contrast to Bersani’s description of self-annihilation as internal to the subject and his or her desires, Edelman describes subjects whose futures are foreclosed because of the external dictates of normativity. Instead of working toward a queer project of assimilation to reclaim those futures, he issues a call to arms: “And so what is queerest about us, queerest within us, and queerest despite us is this willingness to insist intransitively—to insist that the future stop here.” This explicit link between queerness and its position outside of reproductive time allows us to see that practices of self-annihilation interrupt the subject’s linear temporality on both a macro and a micro scale. Queerness, then, in Edelman’s reading is inextricable from the death drive, temporal suspension, and masochism.

Homosexuality, queerness, community, self-annihilation, and jouissance are not equivalent terms, yet they are all put in relation to each other against reproduction and modernity. The link between these concepts is masochism, which, I argue, is the term that creates the outside to modernity in this strain of queer theory. Masochism, these theorists argue, dislocates the subject and its claims to agency by replacing it with temporal suspension, sensation, objectification, and passivity. The links between these concepts are facilitated by a shared politics of marginality, which we might understand in keeping with Judith Butler’s formation of queerness in “Critically Queer” as “never fully owned but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes.” As a practice of self-annihilation, S&M lies outside the bounds of liberal subjectivity; it forms the outside to how the subject has traditionally been understood. Jouissance, the queer, homosexual desire, and stasis lie exterior to the folds of liberal subjectivity. In this formation of queerness, sadomasochism is presented
as exceptional. Foucault, Bersani, and Edelman all take masochism to mark a privileged space outside the norm; Bersani and Edelman see it as a way to resignify an already marginalized space, while Foucault sees it as the creation of a new possibility for being.

By underlining the link between Krafft-Ebing, Freud, Foucault, Bersani, and Edelman, however, I am doing more than illustrating the way that masochism has been read as enacting a form of social critique; I am pointing to the particular formations of self that undergird these formulations of masochism. Bersani’s and Edelman’s use of a psychoanalytic account of masochism produces the idea of a universal subject, a subject who is most easily legible in these accounts as a gay white male. This specificity has been much criticized. While Foucault’s explicit desire to use S&M to distance himself from prevailing discourses of subjectivity gives us pause, several aspects of his discussion of S&M speak to certain assumptions about identity. Most importantly, Foucault imagines an equivalence of power between partners, such that he describes it as a chess game in which reversals of power are straightforward and part of the practice, rather than located external to the actors. By taking this model of community and self-formation for granted, though it is a part of a particular gay male subculture, Foucault fails to accommodate difference.

Difference occupies a complicated space within queer theory; it is often caught in the collision between theorizing subversion and rescripting agency. The clash between movements to expand rights to marginalized subjects and the desire to work outside of the disciplinary trappings of subjectivity has informed how racial and gendered difference is approached in queer studies. José Esteban Muñoz describes the failure to work with identity as an “escape or denouncement of relationality” that “distanc[es] queerness from what some theorists seem to think of as the contamination of race, gender, or other particularities that taint the purity of sexuality as a singular trope of difference. In other words, antirelational approaches to queer theory are romances of the negative, wishful thinking, and investments in deferring various dreams of difference.” Chandan Reddy echoes Muñoz’s argument and pushes it further to argue that sexuality as a frame silences race. Sexuality, Reddy writes, “names the normative frames that organize our disciplinary and interdisciplinary inquiries into our past and into contemporary racial capitalism.” While sexuality has offered much as a site of analysis in queer studies, especially as a space to examine particular modes
of marginalization, it tends to subordinate race and block the other avenues through which race might speak. In discussing Edelman, for example, Reddy wants to historicize his hypothesis in order to open the possibility of subversion and non-normativity to spaces that are not dictated by sexuality. In this way, he seeks to point to networks of affinity between, say, the illegal alien and the queer. He writes that as normativity spreads, “the sinthomosexual [the equation of queerness with the death drive] is not absorbed but displaced onto other cultural subjects and figures. . . . Surely one meaning of the queer ought to be a figure that reveals the corrosive vitality of the death drive that coincides with the establishment of a universal social order.”

In this reformulation, sexuality is not the only political frame at work; it does not amend race but allows its structure to exist with, sometimes intersecting, sometimes not, that of sexuality.

In short, this history of reading for exceptionalism has disavowed difference in its quest to decenter the subject. This is the omission that Muñoz and Reddy allude to. When sexuality is placed at the core of exceptionalism, other markers of difference are either forgotten or marginalized. What, however, would it mean to see masochism not as a practice of exceptionalism or subversion but as an analytic space where difference is revealed? Here, I would like to take a moment to reemphasize the political potential of masochism’s plasticity. Rather than speaking exclusively to subversion, this mobility allows us to see the multiple ways that people experience power and how that shapes the terms of their embodiments. We see glimpses of those spaces throughout my readings of these theorists’ concepts of masochism, but I would like to argue for another type of reading practice, empathetic reading, which would center difference, flesh, and multiplicity.

Though thinking about flesh means thinking about embodiment, it articulates a particular relationship to embodiment in that it is mediated through the social. Flesh connects bodies to the external world by emphasizing the various conditions that make bodies visible in particular ways; it is about power and difference. Historically, flesh is the province of marginalized subjects. Even before Simone de Beauvoir wrote that woman is “shut up in her flesh, her home,” to equate women and racialized others with flesh was to repeat a Cartesian dualism in which the body was inferior to the mind. Hortense Spillers, for example, describes the transformation of black bodies into flesh as one of the artifacts of the transatlantic slave trade. Spillers writes, “Before the ‘body’
there is the ‘flesh,’ that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography. . . . Even though the European hegemonies stole bodies . . . we regard this human and social irreparability as high crimes against the flesh, as the person of African females and African males registered the wounding.”

This dismembering of bodies into flesh is part of the equation of blackness with depersonalization and nonsubjectivity. Spillers argues that this traffic in bodies (and I am using this resonance with Gayle Rubin’s essay “The Traffic in Women” deliberately) marks the production of flesh as a tactic of domination. Flesh connotes objectification, woundedness, and a lack of agency. Yet dismissing it is also problematic. As Spillers notes, “The flesh is the concentration of ‘ethnicity’ that contemporary critical discourses neither acknowledge nor discourse away.”

As such, flesh occupies a fraught position within studies of difference. It oscillates between being a symptom of abjection and objectification and a territory ripe for reclamation. Despite its resonance with objectification and the negation of subjectivity, flesh has become an important political space. To ignore flesh is to ignore how bodies have been made to speak of difference.

The difficulty in taking on flesh, however, stems from the fear that objectification reifies identity and essentializes subjects in particular ways. We see this ambivalence at work in feminist rhetoric that posits the body as “that which has been belied, distorted, and imagined by a masculine representational logic” while simultaneously seeking to redeem a feminine version of the flesh. This cycle of abjection and resurrection does nothing to move us beyond the impasse of identity categories. The question, then, is how to think about flesh outside of identity while retaining its purchase on theorizing difference. In what follows, I propose moving to sensation as an analytic because it allows us to think about flesh, not as something static and essential, but as something that changes, something that is in motion. In this way differences become a matter of relationships rather than fixed essences unto themselves. The focus on sensation to articulate difference leads us back to masochism and toward empathetic reading.

Through synthesizing various iterations of masochism, empathetic reading allows us to read the affective and sensational currents that run through texts. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze’s practice of intensive reading, empathetic reading foregrounds both the corporeality of reading and the “impersonal flows,” the affects and sensations that texts produce.
This set of practices brings attention to the ways that sensation shapes representation and allows me to weave together different tapestries of masochism from different voices grouped by sensational affinity, that is to say grouped by the sensations that they arouse in the reader rather than by historical, disciplinary, or identitarian relationships. Following Claire Colebrook, this is a methodology that asks, “What are the forces of potentiality hidden in our experienced encounters?”

Empathetic Reading and Embodied Knowledge

Empathetic reading is a reading practice, a critical hermeneutic, and the methodology that I use throughout the book. As a reading practice, empathetic reading highlights corporeality and the flesh. Some of this work is done by unpacking the historical structures in which each actor is embedded, but more generally it calls attention to the nonidentitarian circuits of embodied knowledge production. In this way I am taking up Elizabeth Freeman’s call to “theorize S/M, to historicize its theoreticians, and, most urgently, to theorize its historicisms.” By taking the writer into account, I seek to make the flesh more visible within the process of knowledge production. In this regard, history of science and feminist theory has been useful. History of science has provided many ways to understand knowledge production as corporeal, oftentimes enlarging our concept of what counts as knowledge and who is a knowledge producer. History of science’s particular emphasis on the materiality of practice has allowed me to focus on the sensations that are woven into knowledge transmission, giving weight, for example, to the smell of a whip and the texture of a corset. Feminist and queer scholarship also has a rich tradition of thinking critically about knowledge production and access to knowledge. This work emphasizes the importance of thinking through class, race, gender presentation, and sexuality (among other variables) as coproducive of identities. Feminist and queer theory allows us to think about the fact that different bodies have different types of relationships to power and experience its effects differently. This, then, highlights the importance of understanding experience as complex and multiple. By bringing these related but divergent methodologies together, I hope to emphasize the place of contingency and embodiment at the heart of knowledge production. Affect, sensation, experience, and multiplicity are the key terms that I seek to emphasize in thinking about reading.
Further, as a reading practice, empathetic reading illuminates how subjectivity and power act in concert with embodied experience. These insights allow us to see *masochism* as a relational, contingent term that describes a plethora of relationships. What comes to the fore through this practice of reading is a series of unexpected sensational affinities. Theorists and practitioners speak to each other in multiple and unexpected ways. Empathetic reading also functions as a critical hermeneutic and methodology in that it highlights how we can discern the structure of sensation in various texts/performances and it works to give those sensations meaning, which in turn allows us to read difference in a sensational mode.

As a marker of difference, sensation reveals something of the underlying structure that binds assemblages together. Gilles Deleuze provides an example of the relationship between assemblages and sensation. In *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, he describes Bacon’s 1978 painting *Figure at a Washbasin*, which portrays a figure clinging to the sides of a washbasin with his head down. The figure looks as though he is about to jump into the basin, but the rest of canvas—which looks to be the interior of a bathroom—is remarkably static. In his description of the painting, Deleuze writes that “the body-figure exerts an intense motionless effort upon itself in order to escape down the blackness of the drain.” Further, he describes this observed desire to escape as waiting for a spasm. This set of descriptions is extremely evocative; Deleuze captures the motion and emotion of the work, yet it is unclear what this tells us about sensation. While he writes that Bacon may have been trying to approximate abjection or horror, Deleuze condenses this into a scream, which “is the operation through which the entire body escapes through the mouth. All the pressures of the body.” We might describe pressure as the operative sensation in this piece, then. While pressure might be an unintuitive sensation to ascribe to abjection or horror, the logic of sensation is not that which lies on the surface but that impersonal flow which provides the unity for the whole assemblage. Later in the text, Deleuze analogizes this process of finding the logic of sensation with finding its rhythm. Rhythm is “diastole-systole: the world that seizes me by closing in around me, the self that opens to the world and opens the world itself.” This analogy is useful because it illustrates that sensation is something internal to the assemblage that articulates a particular essence, as well as emphasizing that sensation is also something that opens onto others through numerous affective and structural
connections. If the rhythm of the piece is pressure, it is something that is articulated through the combination of colors, lines, movement, and so on of the painting, but it is also something that the viewer can identify and connect with his or her concept of pressure. Through this process of connection on the level of sensation, we can start to unpack why abjection and horror—Bacon’s stated goals—manifest as pressure. This, in turn, allows us to probe the ways we might connect this sensation of pressure to various experiences of these affects.

This simultaneous internality and externality of sensation is what gives it its analytic charge. Through this dimension we can articulate how sensation is connected to politics, bodies, and feelings. It is these linkages in particular that enliven our understanding of the corporeal and its analytic possibilities. By theorizing sensation we acquire a way to understand structures at a level beyond the discursive. We gain access to how these act upon bodies. Though each body reacts differently, we can read a structure as a form with multiple incarnations and many different affects. All of this is achieved without having to appeal to identity; this is about opening paths to difference.

There is, however, another dimension to using sensation as an analytic tool: namely, the fact that deciphering the structure of sensation requires a particular mode of reading that emphasizes the connections between reader and text/object/assemblage. Deleuze puts forward the methodology of intensive reading as putting the text into conversation with the rest of the reader’s world: “This intensive way of reading, in contact with what’s outside the book, as a flow meeting other flows, one machine among others, as a series of experiments for each reader in the midst of events that have nothing to do with books, as tearing the book into pieces, getting it to interact with other things . . . is reading with love.”

This invocation of the readers’ world not only introduces contingency and multiplicity but also invites us to examine the fleshiness, or experiential dimension, of the text. Deleuze is not concerned with the meaning of the text or the individual reader. He argues that a book “transmits something that resists coding: flows, revolutionary active lines of flight, lines of absolute decoding rather than any intellectual culture.” Deleuze foregrounds contingency and experience as they relate to the body (and state) of the reader. This allows him to be attentive to the flesh while not reifying any connection between experience and identity.

While empathetic reading is centrally concerned with deciphering the structures of sensation that subtend various objects/assemblages/texts,
it does so by being attentive to the sensations aroused in the reader. While Deleuze’s practice of intensive reading is attentive to readerly sensation, it is not actually invested in the corporeality of the reader. Here is where we part ways; empathetic reading relies on fostering a connection between the corporeality of the reader and the structures of sensation. This emphasis on readerly corporeality allows the objects/assemblages/texts to be grouped by structure of sensation, thereby allowing for promiscuous and queer groupings and underscoring the work of empathy.

Bringing readerly flesh into the production of textual affect brings to mind other work within queer theory on embodied reading. I place Carolyn Dinshaw’s queer “touch across time” and Elizabeth Freeman’s erotohistoriography alongside empathetic reading. Dinshaw emphasizes the production of history via “a relation across time that has an affective or an erotic component,” with political and present consequences for this touching: “What importance do social, cultural, economic, and political constraints and hierarchies have if we speak so blithely of ‘reenactment,’ ‘citation,’ ‘living with’ a figure from the past?”61 Freeman’s vision of erotohistoriography makes more explicit the ways that history can serve the present; she argues that affective temporal relations may produce “reparative criticism” that “insist[s] that various queer social practices, especially those involving enjoyable bodily sensations, produce forms of time consciousness—even historical consciousness—that can intervene into the material damage done in the name of development, civilization, and so on.”62 While both Freeman and Dinshaw underscore the importance of the corporeal links that are forged between the reader, text, and in many cases, the past and present, empathetic reading offers a twist on that methodology by making explicit the consequences of taking writerly flesh into account through the juxtaposition of disciplines and histories and empathy.

I argue, therefore, that in addition to forging a relationship with the text, the reader forges a relationship with the writer of the text and his or her subject position. Further, these sensational connections between reader, text, and writer are forged through empathy and identification. In its least vexed form, empathy asks the reader to imagine his or her body in the place of another. Even as I write this I acknowledge that this logic of substitution, the literal replacement of one body for another, can be dangerous, both because it threatens to obliterate the other and because it risks “naturalizing the condition of pained embodiment.”63 Though empathy can be a problematic term, I use it to speak about the
way that feeling through another can be a space of multiplicity rather than erasure or imperialism. In this I am drawing on Elin Diamond’s analysis of identification, or what she terms the slide from “I” to “we.” In articulating the political possibilities for identification, Diamond cites Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément’s description of reading as a form of identification: “One never reads except by identification. But what kind? When I say identification, I do not say loss of self. I become, I inhabit. I enter. Inhabiting someone at that moment I can feel myself traversed by that person’s initiatives and actions.” While Cixous recalls Deleuze’s analysis of reading as a process of becoming, she emphasizes the transformation (and augmentation) of self rather than its unmaking. This distinction is critical because it highlights how empathy can work. By preserving the integrity of the self, Cixous draws attention to the way that identification can be a form of inhabitation and multiplicity. Neither self nor other is destroyed, but a lacuna of sensations and feelings binds this hybrid of reader-text-writer. Just as Diamond posits the potential for a politics of identification, “a politics that dismantles the phenomenological universals of transcendent subjects and objects; that places identity in an unstable and contingent relation to identification; and that works close to the nerves dividing and connecting the psychic and the social,” I argue that a critical employment of empathy can produce similar effects. Allowing this multiplicity into the empathetic equation shifts the focus away from understanding the other as unified and transparently available to us and invites us to experience affinities on a corporeal level with others through sensation. This dimension of multiplicity is a space where difference can become apparent while still registering the structures of sensation that undergird the text. Empathetic reading, therefore, allows us to grapple with the position of the other while maintaining a sense of the impersonal flows that bind things together.

Masochism’s Sensations and Histories

In writing the histories of masochism that form the bulk of Sensational Flesh, then, I aim to attend to questions of flesh and sensation. Practically, this has meant paying attention to particular bounded histories in order to see how they might speak to larger questions about the multiple types of relationships that we have with power. Broadly speaking, these histories focus on power’s work in the process of othering, the types of
intimacy that power cultivates, the depersonalization enacted by power, and the self’s tendency both toward and against cohesion. Though I have separated each structure of sensation into a different chapter, I do not meant to suggest that they do not operate in tandem or even at odds with each other. These histories are meant to enliven our thinking about masochism by presenting contradictions, various imaginaries, multiple forms of power, and diverse responses to that power. Further, I see these disparate embodiments as part of larger conversations within queer theory on antinormativity, precarity, queer of color critique, and new materialisms, though the chapters do not explicitly engage with queer theory.

The second chapter, “Specters of Domination: Patriarchy, Colonialism, and Masochism,” picks up where my history of exceptionalism leaves off and analyzes masochism, not as a mode of subversion, but as a symptom of the normative. It does this, first, by exploring the relationship between masochism and white male privilege as it was articulated in feminist debates about patriarchy and lesbian sadomasochism in the United States in the early 1980s; and, second, by analyzing Frantz Fanon’s meditation on colonialism as a pathology that produces white masochism.

Debates about female sexuality in the 1980s revolved around the place of patriarchy in structuring female desire. Some radical feminists argued that sexuality was being used to continue to oppress women. Overt displays of sexuality such as pornography and sadomasochism were deemed especially pernicious because of their ties to masculinity and patriarchy. If heterosexual sex was bad, pornography and sadomasochism exacerbated the power imbalance between the sexes and reinforced the notion of passive femininity. In this way, I see these arguments as heirs to a fin de siècle sexological linkage between female sexuality, deviance, and masculinity. Though these debates most directly respond to radical feminist proclamations of sexual liberation, which were initiated in part by a rejection of Freud and other nineteenth-century sexologists, their ideology echoes this historical linkage between masculinity and sexual desire. Additionally, this close association between women and passivity played into cultural ideas of women as willing victims in rape, abuse, and domestic violence. The assumption that women unconsciously wanted to be abused was a contentious point of the American feminist movement.

These arguments against S&M’s subversive quality gain depth when juxtaposed with Fanon’s analysis of masochism and colonialism. In Black Skin, White Masks, Fanon conceptualizes masochism as inherently white, understanding it to be part of the affective residue of racism.
Speaking from the position of the colonized, Fanon provides an analysis of the psychic tolls of being subject to domination. Thus I add a racialized dimension to this collusion between masculinity and masochism. By unpacking the ways that masochism can function to stabilize regimes of domination, this chapter resonates with recent critics of queer theory’s focus on the antinormative. In her discussion of fake orgasm, Annemarie Jagose notes that critical consensus has moved toward the idea “that transformative political potential attaches by default to queer sexual practice, that is the non-normativity of queer erotic practice that makes it recognizable as political.”70 In the face of this push toward the antinormative, Jagose argues that a turn toward normativity and other configurations of sexuality might actually offer more potential for queer analysis: “Pushing against the commonsense plausibility that credits certain transgressive acts and identities with resistant potential, I am suggesting instead that the more valuable insight afforded by Foucault’s call to bodies and pleasures is the recognition that one’s relation to the disciplinary system of sexuality is necessarily articulated with regard to historically specific and bounded sites of contestation.”71 By looking at those who refuse to prize S&M and masochism as subversive, this chapter augments our understanding of the disciplining of sexuality. These local histories of masochism illuminate the contours (white, male) of a particular mode of freedom while expanding on what it feels like to be othered. Both Fanon and radical feminists articulate feeling dominated as part of the process of othering, a process in which voyeurism, anti-sociality, and detachment come together as the structure of sensations that inform these types of relationships to power. In this way, while I am speaking about two very particular case studies, they serve to show what is at stake when power is formulated as a binary: that is to say, when it is seen as something that one possesses and the other lacks.

The next chapter responds to the crushing weight of normativity by analyzing literary representations that thematize submission. “Objectification, Complicity, and Coldness: The Story of O’s Narratives of Femininity and Precarity,” Sensational Flesh’s third chapter, examines literary representations of submission and femininity to articulate what complicity feels like. Using The Story of O as a starting point, this chapter looks at the ways that submission has been understood as a performance of femininity in the context of postwar France. I argue that The Story of O produces a link between femininity, objectification, and recognition through masochism by foregrounding aesthetics and other models of
agency under conditions of constraint. In this way, I read *The Story of O* as one of the spaces of cruel optimism that Lauren Berlant discusses in her analysis of life under neoliberalism. Berlant writes, “In cruel optimism the subject or community turns its treasured attachments into safety-deposit objects that make it possible to bear sovereignty through its distribution, the energy of feeling relational, general, reciprocal, and accumulative. . . . In a relation of cruel optimism our activity is revealed as a vehicle for attaining a kind of passivity, as evidence of the desire to find forms in relation to which we can sustain a coasting sentence, in response to being too alive.” In her formulation of cruel optimism, Berlant connects fantasies of change, manifested as a desire for passivity and an investment in materiality, to the reality of structural powerlessness.

Though Berlant is invested in life under the slow death of neoliberalism, the performances of femininity under the heavy hand of patriarchy of the immediate postwar period and earlier offer a similar model of confined subjectivity. Ambivalence toward gender, then, is at the heart of the *Story of O*. This ambivalence, embodied by the sensation of coldness, allows us to see the ways that femininity is embedded within prevailing discourses of power. Though this has some resonance with the fear that S&M relies upon an implicitly masculine subject, I read *The Story of O* as a narrative about complicity and the conditions that attend precarity. First, I read the novel in conjunction with Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, in which she argues that masochism is a mode of complicity with feminine objectification that impedes freedom. Next, I read Gilles Deleuze’s “Coldness and Cruelty” and Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in Furs* as producing parallel narratives of female complicity with patriarchy even as they strive to describe female agency. Finally, I read *The Story of O* through Jessica Benjamin and Jean Paul Sartre to understand complicity as the compromised outcome of seeking recognition. While this narrative focuses on femininity to underscore how coldness and an attention to aesthetics mark these situations of complicity, the larger question guiding this chapter is that of complicity and precarity. I want to examine what types of power structures complicity can produce and how these reveal strategies to deal with one’s overwhelming precarity. In contrast to the second chapter’s emphasis on thinking about power as a matter of “us” and “them,” this chapter locates relations to power on an intimate, subject-constituting level, echoing Berlant’s attention to structures of fantasy and subjectivity.

The conditions that foreclose agency are the subject of the fourth chapter, “Time, Race, and Biology: Fanon, Freud, and the Labors of
Race.” By looking at the affective labor of subject formation, this chapter directly engages with recent work in queer of color critique. In *Aberrations in Black*, Roderick Ferguson describes the aims of a queer of color critique as “an epistemological intervention . . . [that] denotes an interest in materiality, but refuses ideologies of transparency and reflection, ideologies that have helped to constitute Marxism, revolutionary nationalism, and liberal pluralism.”73 Queer of color analyses make visible the “manifold intersections that contradict the idea of the liberal nation-state and capital as sites of resolution, perfection, progress, and confirmation.”74 This chapter continues that project by looking at these foreclosures of agency at the level of individuals.

The chapter takes up the question of race, recognition, and the laboring body by focusing on becoming-black as a sensation of becoming-biological and of depersonalization. Through a close reading of Fanon’s historically situated description of racialization during colonialism, I look at the ways that the racialized male body has been described as an ahistoric plane of suffering and explore what work the spectacle of the black body in pain does to produce narratives of black atemporality and becoming-biological in conjunction with white guilt and liberal subjectivity. This chapter examines the racial dynamics at work in the concepts of empathy and sympathy to compare the shame of racialization with the affects produced by the masochism of the liberal subject as articulated by Sigmund Freud. In linking becoming-black with what I term “stickiness,” or the weightiness of being overdetermined, with ahistoricity, and with labor, I analyze the work of Glenn Ligon as illustrating how race has been understood as affective labor and as offering a model for moving beyond that space.

“Lacerated Breasts: Medicine, Autonomy, Pain,” the book’s fifth chapter, looks at the explicitly sadomasochistic practice of Bob Flanagan, “supermasochist” and performance artist; Audre Lorde’s reflections on cancer; and Deleuze’s theorizations of illness and masochism. Through an analysis of Flanagan, Lorde, and Deleuze, this chapter examines desubjectification by focusing on illness, pain, and their attendant affects. The first half of the chapter grapples with different models of producing subjective coherence in the face of illness by paralleling Flanagan’s participation in S&M and Lorde’s practices of memoir. The second half of the chapter investigates the potential empowerment of desubjectification as it is worked through by Deleuze and Lorde.

By foregrounding the agency of pain, we see the work of new materialisms in action. If animacy, according to Mel Chen, “helps us theorize
current anxieties around the production of humanness in contemporary times,” this chapter looks toward two disparate modes of decentering the subject to understand what the political costs of such a move might be.\(^7\) In the face of his own illness, Deleuze imagines masochism as a step away from the discipline of modernity and subjectivity; it allows for the opening of new possibilities for thought and life. The most developed form of this argument is his work with Félix Guattari on the Body without Organs (BwO), which they describe as an anti-Oedipal formation of becoming. We might see this idealization of desubjectification as akin to the models of masochism as a form of exceptional subversion, but I would like to stress that sexuality, subjectivity, and agency work very differently in the BwO. I turn to Lorde’s reading of the erotic as another mode of desubjectification. She writes toward a communal self, scripting agency and sexuality as affects of this plurality.

Ultimately, what is at stake in each of these debates within queer theory and each of these local histories is the relationship between subjectivity, sexuality, and agency. The final chapter of *Sensational Flesh*, “Conclusion: Making Flesh Matter,” looks at the work of Kara Walker to probe the relationship between black women and the flesh. Through an exploration of how one might “play” with history, this chapter probes the limits of individual performance and agency and asks what it might mean to truly conceive of black female subjectivity. By looking at black female masochism, this chapter argues that our understandings of masochism have been shaped by particular framings of sexuality, subjectivity, and agency and asks how we might think otherwise.

*Sensational Flesh* tells several stories about masochism and S&M in order to explore experience and sensation as connected to theory and practice. By placing flesh and difference at the center of knowledge production and circulation, it opens alternate modes of understanding circuits of power. This work centers sensation to look at how people experience power and subordination in a variety of disciplinary situations. At its core, *Sensational Flesh* is about how difference is made material through the particular understandings of sexuality, subjectivity, and agency; and ultimately the book works to produce a new mode of thinking sexuality.