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Torture and the Black American Experience

*But I keeps laughin'
Instead of cryin'
I must keep fightin'
Until I'm dyin'
And Ol' Man River
He just keeps rolling along!*

—Paul Robeson, “Ol’ Man River,” 1938

I grew up a mixed-race kid in a suburban New Jersey home. My White and Jewish mom was from Long Island, while my Black and spiritual dad grew up on a farm in a small town called Cream Ridge. My dad’s father, Grandpa Web, was in the army, stationed in Nuremberg during the trials, right before my dad was born. In the army, he was a cook (and later a drill sergeant), so when he returned home, he would feed all six of his kids like they were soldiers in a mess hall. When my father’s parents moved to New Jersey, they built their shed out of military surplus: army crates and

bricks scrounged from the base. My grandfather, like many men of his generation, was particularly hard on his children. My father and his siblings eventually came to terms with my grandfather and forgave him, despite his rough edges. I disagree with their unqualified forgiveness but understand why they are sympathetic. I sometimes cook up his BBQ sauce in the summer to remember him.

My father has worn many hats over the course of his life. He's been a conscientious objector who fled the National Guard, college dropout, weed dealer, short-order cook, inventor, union man, and even politician. He was the first Black man to be elected to the executive board of I.A.T.S.E. Local 52. In this union organization, he ran the video department alongside the Italian and Irish families who had helped run it since the early golden age of film. They called him names, sabotaged his equipment, and made him haul heavy equipment up the narrow stairwells of Manhattan. My dad was the back door to the I.A.T.S.E. film union for about two decades, helping BIPOC people find good-paying work in an industry that still operated somewhere between a family business and the mob. New York's jazz station, WBGO, was always on in his office. I remember it filling the air with the sound of John Coltrane, Max Roach, Miles Davis, Ella Fitzgerald, and Duke Ellington. Yet I also still remember how my dad bristled after I taunted him in my adolescence and asserted, "I'm not your slave!"

The term “slave” had been normalized for me through casual conversations with my friends. It was also embedded in the fantasy literature I was consuming and the science fiction movies I was watching. The White, middle-class world I inhabited generally didn’t see the word as a problem. For my father, it was triggering. When he heard it, his tone shifted and his brows furrowed. I can still visualize the gentle pain in his eyes as he admonished me for using it so glibly. My mom, sister, and I were all upset by the mood that would be brought into the room. My mom would later describe it with one simple and deeply stereotypical word: “anger.” I know now that it was trauma: the trauma of colonization, of slavery, all caught up in Blackness. My dad was working through that which had disciplined him as a child. He was caught up in the pain of throwing himself against the bars of a White suburban world that had long forgotten the trauma of slavery, while also demanding that he forget it too. I learned what it meant to be Black in that conversation. I learned how to carry my father’s burden even as I traversed White society. My own family history reflects how BIPOC people manage the violence of colonialism. We, like many others, were forced to manage the trauma of being placed on the slave ship.

Others have written about the slave ship experience better than I ever could. Famously, W.E.B. Du Bois (1994) wrote *The Souls of Black Folk* in an attempt to explain the unique experience of Black Americans. He

conceptualizes the Black experience through the metaphor of the veil, where an individual must reconcile their identity through two lenses: (1) a projection of how they appear within society (how the veil appears to others) and (2) a historic and communal understanding of the self (life behind the veil). He refers to this as “double consciousness,” or a “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois 1994, 5). The depth of experience to which Du Bois refers is a result of the dehumanization wrought by slavery. Even in America today, Black folk are constantly negotiating stereotypes that conspire to reduce them to objects. They remain forced to occupy and negotiate positions of both subject and object through their experiences of double consciousness.

The prior chapter established that repairing play acknowledges how torture, however taboo, is a form of play like all others. By centering torture and the histories of BIPOC folk like myself who cannot escape the narratives of torture that still haunt us, we can come to appreciate torture, pain, slavery, and discipline as a history that provides a new foundation for understanding play. Play constantly reminds us of how simple it is to belittle and dehumanize people. It is a constant reminder of how subjectivity, and thus personhood, is fragile and socially negotiated. Cruel words become terrible jokes with a simple twist of the tongue. Play teases,

torments, and toys with people as if they were simple objects. And, in a dark irony, play is celebrated for doing just this. These vertiginous edges are the basis of satire, comedy, and even theater.

Repairing play means understanding how the experience of torture relates to the Black American experience. I do this by considering torture on both societal and individual levels. By exploring torture within and across these two levels, this book prompts a discussion of play that recenters Black people within conversations about play and games and charts a course toward a radical reconstitution of torture within all of our understandings of play and games.

State-Sponsored Torture

Torture, as part of the institution of slavery, is a disciplinary mechanism of dehumanization. Just as Huizinga and Caillois categorized certain forms of destructive and barbaric play as corrupt (or not “civilized”), the philosophy of torture contends with these same boundaries. William Schultz (2007) notes them when defining torture in his collection *The Phenomenon of Torture: Readings and Commentary*:

Somehow inflicting pain on a creature is less acceptable, less “civilized” than doing away with them altogether. That is why we go to great lengths to make sure that the process of capital execution is as sterile

and painless as possible. If we actually appeared to be enjoying another's suffering, if we indulged too openly that part of us that revels in revenge on those who do us wrong, we would see something about ourselves mighty important to keep hidden. The State is meant to be a projection of our values, a mirror of our best selves, and hence, though the State may do away with criminals, it may not gloat in their demise. (Schultz 2007, 8)

Schultz's critique relates mainly to state-sponsored torture, such as that performed by US military personnel on Iraqis in the detention camp at Abu Ghraib. Although torture transgresses boundaries, in warfare, torture is policed. Just as Huizinga and Caillois sought to exclude games that would turn violent or exploit vulnerable populations, Schultz and Méndez illustrate how torture is policed during warfare. All pretenses of civility in matters of both play and war must be abandoned when torture is invoked. Despite this unfortunate conclusion, the practice of torture lies at the heart of both.

Michael Foucault's (1977) *Discipline and Punish* begins with a discussion of torture. The book, often remembered for its discussion of panopticism, opens with a vignette of a man being drawn and quartered in mid-eighteenth-century France. He describes the act in detail to invoke a contrast between the seen and the unseen: "Then the executioner, his sleeves rolled up, took the steel pincers, which had been especially made for the occasion, and which were about a foot and a half long, and pulled first at the calf of the right leg, then at the

thigh, and from there at the two fleshy parts of the right arm; then at the breasts" (Foucault 1977, 3–4). Torture, which used to be an act of public spectacle, still exerted a social and behavioral pressure upon social bodies by the time of his writing in the late twentieth century. It had merely been rendered invisible in most Western societies.

The crucial lesson of *Discipline and Punish* is that although torture has been made invisible, the threat of torture lingers within social institutions as a mode of social control. The spotlight of Bentham's watchtower shines upon prisoners to occlude the shape of the guards monitoring their behavior (Foucault 1977, 201). By extension, the threat of torture is omnipresent. We must consider whether games also act as a similar disciplinary apparatus, concealing the possibility of torture within mere play. Is it possible that when we begin a game that a hint of danger lies beneath the supposed connotations of fun? After all, if the object of the challenge were to decline to participate, they might be labeled stubborn or a "bad sport."

Intimate Torture

Of course, Foucault's writing on torture is not limited only to theories of the state. In *The History of Sexuality*, he notes that torture is used in tandem with confession as a way of understanding another body's sexuality.

Torture and confession became mechanisms for extracting truth from people: “Since the Middle Ages, torture has accompanied [confession] like a shadow, and supported [confession] when it could go no further: the dark twins” (Foucault 1978, 59). For Foucault, in this sense, objective truth does not exist. Truth becomes a vector of power and confession a technique of disciplining the self. Du Bois also contends with torture in this personal, intimate sense. He explains how torture was used as a method for extracting the truth from slaves. Intimate torture relates specifically to how truth is gathered from people seen as less-than-human objects.

The slave’s body is an extension of the master’s body, explains Page Du Bois,¹ relating the phenomenon of torture to the Black American experience. In her book *Torture and Truth*, she draws on an Aristotelian construction to show how the apparatus of torture reduced Black slaves to an object:

The slave is a part of the master—he is, as it were, a part of the body, alive but yet separated from it. ([Aristotle], *Politics* 1255b)

Thus, according to Aristotle’s logic, representative or not, the slave’s truth is the master’s truth; it is in the body of the slave that the master’s truth lies, and it is in torture that his truth is revealed. The torturer reaches through the master to the slave’s body, and extracts the truth from it. (Du Bois 2007, 14)

Through Aristotle's writing, Page Du Bois shrewdly points both to the association of the slave (and therefore Black people generally) with the body—made an object through a traditional understanding of the Cartesian dualism—and its intimate relationship with the master. The slave becomes the object (body) in a relationship where the master is the subject (mind). This understanding of torture and truth is mirrored in the player-played relationship where the player takes on the role of subject, and the played adopts the role of object.

As to what truth is extracted through the intimate relations of torture-play, BDSM becomes an interesting practice to consider. Is truth derived from torture indicative of one's sexuality? BDSM play, as theorized by many within the game studies community,² is far removed from the experience of Black people descended from slaves. It is very different than the torture that Page Du Bois describes. Torture, according to Du Bois, is always a violent expression. Practices around safe words within the BDSM community allow players the space to practice torture—albeit a softer and more socially appropriate form of torture than that which is practiced by the military—without accidentally harming one another. This book reads interventions such as safe words as an intervention intended to blunt the dangerous, toxic, and harmful potentials of play. Importantly, in the spaces of toxic gameplay highlighted by theorists like Vossen (2018) and Gray (2012), no safe word exists to

extract minoritized people from abusive conversations with White men. Sadly, I feel that this lack only furthers the previous points that play is not a voluntary activity. By getting in touch with its traumatic aspects and shared histories of pain, we engage in the difficult work of repairing play.

Some might quibble with the earlier comparison, arguing that BDSM is not actual torture but instead “torture.” Because in its ideal form, BDSM is consensual; it is categorically different than practices like waterboarding. In this sense, a skeptic might argue that BDSM is a form of play while reserving “torture” for disciplinary military activity. Discussions such as this miss the point. Again, they argue that the difference between play and torture alike is volunteerism. As I have argued in chapter 3, volunteerism is a form of social privilege that is not necessary to play’s definition. Torture is play because play is not always voluntary. Even innocent forms of torture, such as tickle torture, don’t assume a consensual relationship between the parties involved.

Slave Songs

Slave songs—also known as spirituals, sorrow songs, and jubilees—were improvisational songs that Black slaves sang with one another. They are read and understood today as simultaneously resistance and spirituality. They are resistance insofar as their meanings were

illegible to the slavers who held them captive and spiritual because they evoked strong emotions between the Black folk who sang and listened to them. They were the Church, so to speak, of Black kinship on the plantation. For the purposes of my argument in this book, it is vital that we understand the importance of slave songs against the backdrop of torture. The spirituality of slave songs was, in fact, produced by the hopeless conditions within which slaves were kept. They are sullen, painful, and lamenting. They are play both because they memorialize the most painful aspects of torture and because they are improvisational performance.

Many historians and critical race theorists look to Fredrick Douglass's book *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* for a firsthand account of the conditions of slavery. Douglass, who escaped slavery and sought refuge in the northern United States, describes the slave songs sung on plantations:

[Slave songs] told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit, and filled me with ineffable sadness. I have frequently found myself in tears while hearing them. The mere recurrence to those songs, even now, afflicts me; and while I am writing these lines, an expression of feeling has already found its

way down my cheek. To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery. I can never get rid of that conception. Those songs still follow me, to deepen my hatred of slavery, and quicken my sympathies for my brethren in bonds (Douglass 1845, 11–12).

Douglass goes on to describe how “slaves sing most when they are most unhappy,” and that the songs bring relief, “only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears” (Douglass, 12) Douglass’s account of slave songs has an affective and visceral impact upon the listener. The context of Douglass’s account cannot be forgotten. As Jennifer Stoeber (2016) notes, he prepared his book as an effort to educate White readers about the contexts and trauma of slavery. As such, Douglass’s goal in making slave songs legible was part of an effort to “challenge his white readership to listen beyond their racialized expectations and desires” (49). This outreach is a plea for common ground: an effort to mobilize the play of sound in order to broker empathy with the White public.

Importantly, the slave songs evoke tears in Douglass because they encourage him to remember the conditions of torture within which he was raised. The play of torture and the play of slave songs overlap. Both evoke tears for the same affective and visceral reasons. Yet, unlike torture, the slave song is reparative because it offers relief. It repackages the torturous and opens an avenue for singers and listeners to process their pain. Like a vaccine, this therapy pulls on a small amount of

the painful, brutal, and torturous to aid the listener in working through their past pain.

Instruments and Play

In the English language, one can “play” an instrument, but they do not “play” when they sing. Perhaps this is because play is implied. As I have argued in chapter 3, play is a relationship between subject and object. So it is grammatically correct to apply the term to the objects that are played with, like the guitar, saxophone, and drums. When singing, the instrument is the body, so the English language implies play in the term “sing.” What is interesting in this grammatical construction is how the English language encourages a sensibility around play that stops short of recognizing how the term turns subjects into objects. Perhaps the only two linguistic constructions of play in English that read the body as object are the phrases “playing with myself” and “playing on my heartstrings”—slang for masturbation and sympathy, respectively. Common to both is the idea that play should be affectively vivid—a motif this book has already highlighted. Reinforcing my larger point, play is either pleasure or pain.

I return to the terms *linguistic connotations* because I feel that they highlight some of the blind spots in play scholarship. Because most contemporary scholarship on theories of play approaches it from a position indebted

to games and game studies, we often miss opportunities to theorize play more broadly. We fail to appreciate the more robust kernel of cultural signification within it. Within music, play holds many modalities—subtly different expressive palates. We “play” music, yet we also listen to it. When listening to recorded music, the term *playback* is used. And while role-playing game studies has long been aware of how central improvisation is to theater and performance, one must ask if scholars have yet caught on to how central improvisation has been to Black culture, as evident in the scenes of the aforementioned slave songs.

Play has the potential to be repair, but to do so, we must embrace connotations of play that are more clearly connected to the histories and experiences of BIPOC worldwide. These histories are exciting, innovative, and often constructive of affects that encompass more than just the pleasurable. The next chapter focuses on some different examples of play by BIPOC creators to highlight how they bring pain to the fore in our conversations around play.

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