Playing to Lose

A Conversation with Avgi Saketopoulou and Lucie Fielding

Beckett Warzer

The way we are talking about consent is changing. The publication of psychoanalyst Avgi Saketopoulou's *Sexuality Beyond Consent: Risk, Race, and Traumatophilia* in 2023 was a watershed moment in discourses of sexuality such as psychoanalysis and queer theory. *Sexuality Beyond Consent* critiques the affirmative consent model that is used in contexts ranging from courtrooms, corporate HR, and the world of kink/BDSM. Affirmative consent assumes the transparency of our own desires, motives, and actions, and relies on our putative, unimpeded ability to communicate these about something as conflictual and charged as sex. But what happens when we didn't know we wanted something until after we got it? Or when we thought we wanted something, but realize afterward that we didn't? What about the unconscious, and what is incommensurable and unaccountable about sexual experience? The unknowable in ourselves, as well as in the relational space between people, means that there is always risk involved when opening oneself to sex and intimacy, alone and with others.

Lucie Fielding, a sex therapist, is one of the practitioners who has most rigorously and passionately put Saketopoulou's critical concepts to work in the space of kink as well as in clinical technique with trans patients. Through workshops like "Portals to Overwhelm: Exploring Psychological Edgeplay" (in collaboration with professional dominatrix Empress Wu), Fielding plays out in real time, with real stakes, what it means to take seriously the model of "limit consent" that Saketopoulou offers as an alternative to affirmative consent. Limit consent asks us to give up the illusion of control and surrender to the risk inherent in a sexual encounter intrapersonally and interpersonally, and it opens participants to the possibility of a deeper, more entwined ethical relation to the other, which stems from a place of mutual vulnerability, rather than a place of attempted safety. A theorist as well, Fielding problematizes what she calls the "safety axiom" in their book *Trans Sex: Nurturing Trans Erotic Embodiment and Gender-Pleasure* ([2021] 2026), and develops instead the concepts of "solidarity" and "mutual entanglement" within sexual/sensual/kink play. To a collection of ways of knowing and living queer nightlife, our conversation contributes a discourse of risk, sex, and solidarity that is not only relevant in the club, bathhouse, or bedroom, but also equips us with tools for living, fighting, and sticking together at a time when the stakes could not be higher.

BECKETT WARZER**:** One of the main alliances that I found in your work, specifically *Sexuality Beyond Consent* [2023] and *Trans Sex* [(2021) 2026], is that you are both describing a kind of ethics, a way of being in relation to another person in physically and psychologically riskful experiences. And this way of being with another person, that both of you use various terms for, entails a containing or witnessing relationship, with an insistence and a commitment that one will remain in relationship

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with the other through potential difficulty, and even through rupture. I'm thinking about exigent sadism and limit consent and the concept of solidarity developed in *Trans Sex* [(2021) 2026]. Could you talk about this ethic—its structure, and its necessity?

AVGI SAKETOPOULOU**:** I'll start with saying that my own thinking is very informed by how I have come to understand psychoanalytic ethics. The psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche, by whom I have been greatly influenced, introduces the notion of "the tub" to describe how the analytic situation is set up such that it can separate the adaptive domain from the domain of infantile sexuality [(1987) 2015]. The tub, in other words, is engineered to "contain" in a way that proliferates the *sexual*, which is, for me, where the risk of encounter inheres. By the way, I should clarify that I will be using the word "sexuality" today in a doubled way—to refer sometimes to infantile sexuality in the Freudian sense and at others to what we commonly understand as sexuality: the domain of sex acts, sexual fantasies, etc. Thinking psychoanalytically has given me ways to think about ethics differently than the way conversations about ethics are usually happening in queer spaces, conversations that focus on a version of accountability that imagines spaces uncontaminated by not just the effects of trauma and the impacts of power differentials, but also the fact that people are not always at their best, that we all fail, that we want things from each other, or want the other to want things from us, in ways that cannot be fully controlled. A vision of ethics that leans on a distinctively psychoanalytic appreciation of psychic life includes that which is irreducibly opaque to ourselves about ourselves, and ushers in surprise, the unexpected, contradiction, even the incommensurable. This vision opens us up to a different vista of how we might think ethics. Though I hasten to add, this formulation of psychoanalytic ethics is not one every psychoanalyst espouses. Thus envisioned, ethics can begin to stretch beyond safety, though it cannot ensure that on the other side of the encounter we will find the reward of having been good, or the condemnation of having been bad, which has always felt very reductive to me and also very painful. I'm thinking of community spaces that have come undone because they have not been able to tolerate the disjunction between one's words and one's actions, the disjunction between one's conscious intent and the unconscious's irruption in ways that startle and exceed our intentions, motives, and plans.

Muriel Dimen, who is a very influential relational psychoanalyst—she was my mentor, my supervisor, and eventually became a friend—talked about this in the context of sexual boundary violations in the field of psychoanalysis. She said that we want to imagine the field as having some bad apples, and if we were to sever those analysts who transgress from the field, the field might be purified from the rot and, thus, become safer for our patients, when in fact, the rot is in the barrel itself [Dimen 2016]. And she didn't just mean this in the sense of institutional problems within psychoanalysis, which are numerous and very serious. She was also talking about how there's something about the intensities of intimacy and what it means to be before another person in a way that is more or less disarmed—in ways that psychoanalysis courts and in ways that many intimate spaces rouse forces that are outside our control. The rousing of these forces is not a problem that needs to be, or can be, solved, but it is rather the very feature, and heat, I would say, of intimate sexual encounters—and here, I mean sexual in either/both senses of the word I referenced before. Of course, it's never the case that we are fully disarmed, but some contexts tease that out of us more than others, contexts that invite forces of excitement and forces of wanting to brush up against the limit in ways that may or may not go well and that are not just determined by our conscious aims or by motives of which we are unaware. We do not like to think about how much it also has to do with contingency, with what we cannot fully control. So, I was interested in thinking about what happens if we say, "Okay, what if we get in a room and close the door, so to speak, and then see what happens if we take risks with each other?" Which is a very big ask and, really, in some ways, the ask of psychoanalysis. This is more than just asking people to be courageous or open. It's also asking people to risk being hurt and see what can come out of that hurt, which goes towards traumatophilia.

LUCIE FIELDING**:** I really love the way that you framed that, Avgi, because my thinking about ethics, and my thinking about risk and relation, is also deeply informed by psychoanalytic thinking, and depth psychological approaches as well. And I'm thinking in particular, if I can speak

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personally, of the confrontation with gender and sexuality that took place in the midst of my training as a therapist. One of the workshops that we engaged in at that time was an Authentic Movement workshop, which is a post-Jungian movement therapy modality that is a form of "active imagination." As part of that, I had this visceral reverie experience where I met, in some sense, a future version of myself, not knowing, of course, that it was a future version of myself. And I made this resolution afterwards that if something scared me, if something was charged—psychically, energetically charged—that I would move toward it instead of away from it. And that's when I really, in earnest, committed to exploring gender. And I share this because I think I've been constantly returning to that moment and trying to figure out: how do I explain how to do this for other people? Like, why would you turn *toward* risk? Why would you turn toward something that is scary, that is charged? Why would you, to use this gorgeous image from Hélène Cixous [(1983) 1991], why would you hurl yourself into the fire? With the risk of knowing that you could either be self-immolated, or, in Cixous's rendering, that you could be bathed in sweetness. The bathed in sweetness outcome is by no means guaranteed, of course.

I'm very much informed by Wilfred Bion [(1979) 1994] and in particular, the notion of the "emotional storm." And Avgi, I noted that you referenced this quote about that, which I love, in an interview you did with Mistress Blunt (2024). I love the idea that when two people come together, an emotional storm is created. In that essay, the emotional storm that Bion is talking about is not positive. So he takes a rather dim view of the emotional storm, but I'm really tantalized by this idea that—to get to something you were saying about queer spaces being so focused on accountability and a kind of purity of thought and of action—that here is this notion that what is needed to take risk in relationship with others is tension; is conflict. At the heart of the solidary relationship, as I talk about it in *Trans Sex*, is tangling with something.

SAKETOPOULOU**:** I love the way you're putting it, Lucie. I just noted down the words: confrontation, energetically charged, and tantalized, which have this quality of a disturbance as opposed to something that is going well and is well regulated. And a lot of Bion's work is actually very much about the question of how the clinician might metabolize the patient's bizarre, beta elements, as he names them, to turn them into digested bits that can become the "furniture of thought," to render them more usable for the patient to be able to think. For me, what can fall out of this model is the question of where the body is in all of that and where history—not only personal but capital H history—is to be located. So I'm very struck by this moment you describe, that you remember as a kind of discrete episodic morsel where you have to decide: are you leaning in and perhaps falling into this vertiginous edge, or do you hold yourself back? This is precisely what I try to describe with the notion of limit consent; that consent also has to do with one's experience with oneself, what one will allow oneself to step into, and that it is not just an interpersonal issue. What do you do with these moments where you feel like, "I could look over the edge, and I'm scared," but that's also the moment that could create something new? Do you step into such a moment, do you take the risk? Perhaps that something new will feel good, perhaps it will not but even when it does not feel good (or only good), that does not necessarily have to mean it was destructive, except perhaps destructive of previous iterations of the self.

I'm really interested in what you think about the moment in which someone does something that they experience after the fact, in the *après coup*, as a decision—but in the moment it may not have felt like a decision, perhaps more of an acceptance. Like they have been drawn into something as opposed to having decided to walk into something.

FIELDING**:** I always think about the "come hither." I think about a client that I name Xochi in the book, who has this confrontation with image where they imagine themselves in a smoking jacket, or a robe, that's open and their top surgery scars are visible. And they're kind of leaning on the bed, tapping it. The seduction of the "come hither." I guess I love being seduced. I love being wooed. I love being drawn in, sometimes even despite myself. I would say that that was my experience being

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confronted with your book, especially the end of the introduction, which just took my breath away: like, well, okay, I guess I will follow you into this. I didn't know that this is what I've been waiting for, but here I am. Again, to reference Cixous, "here I am: in it" [(1983) 1991:3].

WARZER: I feel like what I am hearing you both talk about is the moment one finds oneself on the edge of being seduced, and the risk one takes by plunging in, opening oneself to being hurt; being changed. And of course, there is a sexual drive toward our wounds themselves, we are seduced by our wounds again and again. To bring it back to queer group life, I feel like there are traumatophilic and traumatophobic approaches to queer community. So often what we see is a traumatophobic relationship to group life in general, where there's either a flight from conflict, or an entrance into a kind of manualized way of dealing with conflict that is meant to minimize risk to all parties, and minimize the unknown, as if those are things that we can actually control or should want to.

FIELDING: I think that this speaks to a distinction between the emotionally corrective experience and the emotionally transformative experience and perhaps speaks to your work, Avgi, on the reparative and the antireparative. Because I think that there's this yearning—and I see this all the time with my clients particularly when wanting to repair a relationship—this yearning for the corrective emotional experience where everything can be put right. I see that so often also in accountability processes within queer kink spaces.

SAKETOPOULOU: As if there's a way to not have a residue.

FIELDING: Indeed!

SAKETOPOULOU: As if there's a way to clean things out. I was very taken by what you said, Lucie, about the end of the introduction, because those were the two paragraphs in the book that I agonized over the most, the ones that I wrote and rewrote again and again. And they did feel extremely vulnerable for me because it was exactly what I wanted to say. I actually had to tell myself, you're not going to write another book ever, so just throw yourself into this one, you will never have to do this ever again. Things ended up playing out differently, I did cowrite another book, but to ask a reader to give themself to me is not easy. It's a risk and it felt very vulnerable because it is also very revealing. So when you were speaking earlier about Cixous's question about why we don't hurl ourselves into the fire—I think it has personal implications, intra-psychic implications, relational implications, and political implications, especially at a time when so many people have been dedicating their energies to just surviving, or preserving themselves. And in some way, the turn to the reparative is very much a form of self-preservation, very much a closing in on oneself; not hurling oneself. I have been thinking lately about the self-preservative as following austerity logics, instituting a kind of austerity politics where hurling yourself towards the fire is only seen as self-destructive. "Hurling" is what does the work, for me: not just daring the fire, but throwing yourself into something. And that I think has the energy of a sexual drive that you were talking about, Beckett. Traumatophilia is not the same thing as wanting to be traumatized, it's more about the unwillingness to not take that risk, to not relinquish the possibility of seeing what is beyond that line.

I am preoccupied these days with a piece of performance art I'm writing about, Carolina Mendonça's *Zones of Resplendence* [2023]. I see *Zones* as exploring what it would mean to think about us hurling ourselves into the fire to fight a war with our wounds, with how our wounds yield weapons. I am interested in this idea that our wounds can equip us with something that enables us to take risks, whether that produces something transformative or not—which is always the risk of traumatophilic engagement. For me, an ethics of risk-taking involves de-linking the risk from its outcome. Right now, for example, to be in the United States is to have to decide how to relate to the social contract, which is always a question of how one is going to position oneself vis-a-vis power. Anti-Zionist activists are being targeted by the state; trans people and trans kids especially have a target on their backs; immigrants are being abducted in the streets: there is no way to fight

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this fascism without putting oneself on the line. My worry is that those of us on the Left and in more progressive circles imagine that the way to fight fascism is just by taking care of each other, without also actively throwing ourselves in the fire, without risking losing access, privilege, forms of safety, relationships, and so on. Risk-taking is, of course, also tied to differential vulnerability since putting oneself on the line will always be punished differently across gender, racial, and class lines. But I believe that we have to think of resistance as a risk that is inevitably also sutured to loss; you can't hurl yourself into the fire without also getting burned, and that is something that liberal forms of solidarity don't dare imagine. To risk while taking seriously *that* you will lose—for me, that's the exigently sadistic move.

WARZER**:** That's a perfect transition to my next question, which is about the specter of safety, and how safety is conflated with comfort toward regressive ends. We've seen this come up in many different respects over the past couple of years. Top of mind is some cis people conflating their discomfort with sharing bathrooms with trans people, with a threat to their safety, when it is obviously trans people whose safety is at risk in that situation. We've seen a similar dynamic play out on college campuses, in which Zionist students who experience discomfort when confronted with anti-Zionist ideas, or even when merely seeing symbols of Palestinian culture, conflate this discomfort with being unsafe. When of course the students whose actual safety has been at risk have been Palestinian students, other students of Arab descent, international students, and in some cases anti-Zionist Jews, especially if they're Jews of color. I see both of your works as critiquing paradigms of safety—I'm wondering how your critiques are potentially related to, and helpful in clarifying, these conflations between danger and discomfort.

FIELDING**:** I think that there's this sense that safety is going to do all of these things for us. That if we have it, it's going to be the thing that will allow us to take risk. That it will allow us to come into relationship with others. And so we have to have safety first before we can do anything else. That's what I call the "safety axiom." But safety doesn't actually do—at least the way that we use it—what we desperately want and need it to do. We want risk-taking, but that's not what it actually allows us to do. So we're being sold a bill of goods, really. And I have a lot of empathy for the desire for a feeling of safety because I know that it comes from a place of, you know, where I find myself waking up sometimes, where I'm thinking: I don't know what to say, I don't know what to do. How do I find the words? How do I find the actions to meet this moment? How do I come into relation to risk, and know that no one can promise you that it's going to be okay or that it gets better, to use a Dan Savage formulation. It doesn't necessarily get better. I cannot offer hope or optimism, but I can try to offer a path to dreaming a future, which is much more risky and challenging to contemplate.

SAKETOPOULOU**:** For me, the photographic negative of safety is the question of what counts as violence. And this takes us back to what you were saying earlier, Beckett, about how the violence of the State does not get counted as violence, but the "violence" of a trans body in a bathroom, or the "violence" of a queer teacher who "exposes" kids to their lifestyle, or the "violence" of the presence of a keffiyeh, these are given this almost messianic quality, right? If we think about what Fanon calls the atmosphere of violence, and what Eric A. Stanley writes about in *Atmospheres of Violence* [2021], we recognize the difference between thinking about individuals whose psychic reality is different than material reality, and noting the way in which those narratives then get weaponized by the State, recruiting rhetorics of safety as a way of controlling people and really, as a way of justifying projects that were already in the works.

So I don't think anybody buys that all of a sudden there's an increase—well, I should say I don't buy that there's an increase in transphobia. I think that it was always there, alive and well even when DEI initiatives were flourishing, which they are not anymore. The difference is that transphobia is now becoming more socially acceptable because it can be hooked onto bathrooms or hooked onto concerns about whether people are transitioning too fast or whatever. So this is painful. But it's also

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clarifying. It's clarifying to realize that all of the concern about pronouns that has been performed on campuses has actually concealed the stench of a disowned transphobia. Now, the transphobia is more apparent, as so many institutions (and individuals) are sacrificing trans people in their compacts with the federal administration, for example by capitulating to the administration's definition of gender as assigned sex at birth in order to preserve their federal funding. It's not to say that it's good that we are where we are, but, from my perspective, at least we know what we're dealing with when we have people who are willing to say awful things about our Arab comrades and about Palestinians that they would previously have never said out loud. At least we know what's going on and can *point* to it without being accused of being paranoid or speaking in bad faith. And then for me, the stakes are not only in how we get the State to pull back from its repressive overreach, but in how we put ourselves at risk in order to protect each other, to take actions that protect each other, whether the thing you're taking a risk for applies to you or not. This takes me to the work that you're doing around solidarity, Lucie. What does it mean to think about solidarity, as not just being about supporting each other?

FIELDING**:** Yes. Solidarity is all too often asserted as a performative gesture, a mere speech act. As you're saying, Avgi, it so often becomes about, well, "I support this" instead of "I am putting myself on the line with this." Safety is often about safety *from* something, whereas solidarity is always *with* something and someone. It requires what my dear friend Empress Wu refers to as "mutual entanglement," that sense that you have to be willing, and indeed somewhat excited by, the prospect of tangling with and grappling with the conflicts that are so very often the subject of psychodynamic work. And the point is not to try to resolve them, but to try to find something new from them, to strive for something new from them. Safety, as a value, is preservative of the status quo. You speak so gorgeously in *Sexuality Beyond Consent* [2023], Avgi, about the ways that the ego is so concerned with stability and maintenance and control. And I think about what Freud wrote, that maintaining safety is the ultimate concern of the ego. So what are the things that are ego-dystonic? For me, solidarity is a gift. It's really sitting with something, putting yourself on the line, and risking something.

SAKETOPOULOU**:** Yeah, this giving up something seems really important because there is a version of entanglement—which is not, as far as I understand it, the way that you and Empress Wu talk about it—which is the entanglement of: well, whatever happened in Palestine is going to happen here. This argument—that what is happening in Palestine will eventually happen in the US, too—as for example when we were hearing that the surveillance technologies the IDF tested in Palestine, the US would eventually use against its own people (and which we are now seeing in Minneapolis with ICE)—this kind of argument is, for me, a very low ethical bar from which to be thinking about solidarity. The problem is that it leaves untouched the prioritization of the self. The kind of entanglement that I have in mind when I think about how you, Lucie, use solidarity, and in how I think about exigent sadism vis-a-vis solidarity, is not about the interconnectedness of how power works or how it disciplines all of us and conducts our conduct, true as those are. It's more about what it means to give something up: a job, cultural capital—and for that, one has to transform oneself, to lose a part of oneself. This is one of the big arguments in *Sexuality Beyond Consent*, that we don't just get to change our minds or do things differently without an undoing of the ego, and that requires nothing less than a crisis.

WARZER**:** I feel like what I'm hearing both of you say about the critique of the safety axiom is that you have to be willing to lose, to take risks and to sacrifice and to lose. I wonder if that is one of the ways to respond to the weaponization of the rhetoric of safety and its conflation with comfort. We need a world in which trans people are safe in bathrooms and Palestinian students are safe on campuses. But do we get there by doubling down on safety, or do we get there by being willing to risk safety to be in solidarity with others?

FIELDING**:** I think it is also about a conceptual problem of disentangling different forms of discomfort. I think about this in relation to what sex educator Tristan Taormino has said to me

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about anal sex: there is an important distinction between different and painful [2024]. So often, we conflate the two—we think that if a sensation is different, and it's not comfortable, then it must be painful. If it actually is painful, then particularly in sex, you never want to force it. But I think there is a vast terrain of difference and variability that gets collapsed. And that's the part that safety cannot, cannot possibly tend to.

SAKETOPOULOU**:** Talking about it this way, it can begin to sound to some like we are speaking about a moral imperative and an injunction. The problem with hearing it that way is that it could be easily turned into a superego injunction, that it can be read as if we are saying that as a good queer, as a good political subject, you are supposed to do X. And we know what happens when these things turn into superego injunctions: they feel like they're persecutors from the outside.

We have become so impoverished in how we're thinking about psychic life and about the neoliberal, bound subject as being reasonably preoccupied with its own self-preservation, that the idea that the risk that you take for the other is a sacrifice of the self, in which you are willing to spend yourself down for somebody else's sake, can sound to some as an imposition. In the way that I see you, Lucie, working the concept of solidarity, spending oneself down is a risk that can also bring about the expansion of the self. To not take this in a moralizing direction, to not be finger wagging, saying, "this is what one is supposed to do," is to take seriously what Sophie Lewis calls the erotics of antifascism (2025). This is why the language you were using earlier, Lucie, felt so meaningful to me, because I see so many of your terms as having to do with the energy of the sexual drive: the hurling, the intensity, the tension—all of these are also erotic energies, as is traumatophilia. So very often, on the Left and/or in queer spaces, we turn to theory, logical argumentation, reason. What about what the body is able to rehearse that our minds won't dare? I'm thinking about how Fanon [(1961) 1963] talks about how the body of the colonized is always rehearsing, dreaming of how to liberate itself. What if we attuned ourselves to our bodies' resistances? What if hurling does not come from the mind, from being convinced to do something that may even go against your own self-interests, but it is your body that wants to throw itself into the flames? What if risk-taking is not about the reasoned operation of contemplation or rational decision-making but engages something on the level of the drive. This, of course, has always been the fear—it was certainly Freud's fear; that the drive, unleashed, unsublimated, and unrestrained will wreak havoc on civilization. But what about how civilization also has wreaked havoc, exercising its violence through the "civilizing impulses" of colonialism, of binary gender, of heteronormative social reproduction?

I do not subscribe to "the body keeps the score" way of thinking about trauma, because the body doesn't keep the score of anything that is not mediated through the mythosymbolic, through culture, through hegemony, etc. So I'm not arguing for an unmediated relationship of the body to revolutionary politics, but I am very much arguing against thinking about the willingness to risk as coming from a place of calculated decision-making as opposed to the way you were talking about it earlier too, Lucie, as that moment where you met a future version of yourself, a version that was also differently embodied.

FIELDING: To bring this to kink, I think about those moments in a scene, and I've experienced this personally, where you feel on the cusp of something, but then someone starts crying, or you see them in distress, and then you think, "Oh, well, I better go into a caretaking mode. I better try to tend to them, to go into a contingency care plan or an aftercare plan." But then, what is lost if you don't just sit with what is going on in that scene, stay in it, and stay entangled with your scene partner?

SAKETOPOULOU**:** Sit with the scene, or even keep up the pressure.

FIELDING**:** Yeah. On the other side of the tears might be something. And I'm not speaking about catharsis. But something unexpected, unanticipatable, and perhaps unimaginable that might emerge, or better yet, break through.

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SAKETOPOULOU: Speaking from a clinical perspective, one of the most common complaints that patients have is that their clinicians don't push them hard enough.

FIELDING: Yes.

SAKETOPOULOU: Which should not be confused with imagining that when you do push clinically, the patient will be grateful. They won't be, they will be upset with you; the negative transference flares; the anxiety and the feeling of being "done to" flares. It's a particular skillset to know how to work with that clinically, but to be willing to do so has to do with the clinician's disposition to take a risk. And I think this risk-taking is also very much about ethics in the sense that the clinician is responsible for what happens after that press, whether you intended it or not, which is not the same thing as to say you're guilty. But you are responsible. This is a very vulnerable position for the clinician to be in, and also, Lucie, to think about SM, for the top to be in, because part of why people pull back is because they're afraid of hurting somebody. Allowing oneself to go to the place where you don't just stay and hold but actually keep the tension—that's where things come undone. And there's no manual for that. There's no workshop. There's no technique. You have to show up as yourself. We as clinicians have to show up as ourselves. A top has to show up as themself. And that's a huge risk that we don't often talk about. We talk about the vulnerability of the patient. We talk about the vulnerability of the bottom. None of these are to be minimized. But to me, it's also about entanglement.

FIELDING: I think about those many moments with a client where, if I say this thing, they might just end the session and walk out, or they might end the relationship. But you have to be able to risk that the relationship *will* actually end, that they *will* walk out, and that they'll never come back. Sometimes it's important to be in that discomfort. As you're saying, Avgi, they'll never be like, at least not in the moment, "oh, thank you so much for offering that reflection." It's normally like, on the milder end of it, "Lucie, you asshole."

SAKETOPOULOU: Right. And I'm not saying this from the perspective of "well, we know what's better for the patient," either, or from a paternalistic place of knowing that the patient needs to hear something whether they are ready to hear it or not. I'm talking about entering that moment with one's own vulnerability and exposure, including the willingness to be exposed to the patient's anger or disappointment. This is not at all easy for us as clinicians because, if you are going to step into this territory with the patient and the patient gets angry, you will very much deserve the patient's anger and you will feel it. I had a supervisor who, when I would try to get patients to be curious about things I thought we should be talking about, would say to me: you're asking a question that the patient is not interested in, so of course they're angry with you. *You* care about that question, the question may even prove to be important *to* the patient but right now that's *your* agenda. There's something very sobering about this very nuanced dance that I think also happens in SM. I think there are a lot of parallels between SM and psychoanalytic work, which are about holding something but also taking some risks with yourself and taking the risk of causing someone's distress and not necessarily seeing that as the endpoint of the encounter. Each time we find ourselves in these crossroads, we will have to do the work anew of assessing the moment, and deciding whether this is a moment for risk-taking or not, for pushing or not, whether you can bear sitting with what comes. And if you do, you don't get to dismiss the patient's feelings of anger or hurt by diagnosing them away, you don't get to say that the patient is exaggerating or that it's for their own good; you do have to bear your share of responsibility for it.

WARZER: Could you talk more about the relationship between the spaces of kink and psychoanalytic or otherwise clinical work? Those two domains really span across *Trans Sex* and *Sexuality Beyond Consent*. On the one hand, psychoanalysis teaches us about the centrality and the radicality of the sexual drive everywhere, and especially in clinical work. On the other hand, Adam Phillips has said that psychoanalysis is about what two people can say to each other if they agree to not have sex [Bersani and Phillips 2008:1].

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SAKETOPOULOU: In a paradoxical way, I think that what ends up getting unleashed in the consulting room can be much more intense than just having sex. And I don't mean this to diminish the power of sexuality in saying this, but to talk about what it means to go outside genital sexuality, to go outside of thinking of sex as an act, and towards what I was saying earlier about the intensities of infantile sexuality: part objects, the craving for excitation, excitations that do not seek release but escalation even, as Laplanche says, to the point of exhaustion [(2007) 2011:1]. For Freud, sadomasochism is the most important element of infantile sexuality, though I see sadism differently than he does, which also brings up questions of how power circulates and how the erotics of power play out in the consulting room. For me, the consulting room is a very erotic space, which is not to say that I'm sitting there being turned on all the time, but it is also not to say either that bodily excitation is not part of the work.

In a paper I really love, the psychoanalyst Humphrey Morris writes that we can't pretend that psychoanalysis is a pretend venture; for him, what happens in the analytic encounter is perhaps even more real than real life [2016:1175]. The locution that psychoanalysis is an "as if" space has been used a lot in our field, I think to relieve analysts from the anxiety that what they're doing in the consulting room is very, very real. It's real for the patient. And it's also very, very real for us. Yes, we're trained and yes, this is a job, but our work with patients gets under our skin, and the analyst's own psychic life and embodied experience are not sequestered from the work. We dream about our patients, we have all kinds of relationships with the patient's material that extend outside the consulting room. And I'm beginning to get into territory that makes a lot of people anxious because questions of boundaries and legalities and propriety begin to arise precisely on this edge.

FIELDING: I think here about Ofer Zur's [2009] distinction between the boundary crossing and the boundary violation and how we engage in boundary crossings all the time that are appropriate, that are necessary. Or I think about, to pick up another piece here, going into certain play parties, where at an opening circle the organizers might talk about the conditions of consent and what consent is and so on. And I remember one play party organizer saying, one of the things that we never do in this space and that will get you thrown out of the space is if you "negotiate up," which refers to when you've already negotiated the parameters of a scene and then you're in the midst of it and something happens and you get a kind of intuitive pull. Negotiating up would be like saying, "hey, I'm having a thing here, can we go to this place?" And the organizers were saying no, you can't do that. Because in the space of the scene, you have to be careful about subspace and top space and all the flow spaces. And I get the point. I get the point that like, especially if you have newbies in a room, you have to know the rules in order to break them, in a sense. But the intuition in a scene is the juicy part. It's what distinguishes it from the possibility of it being more than a spanking.

SAKETOPOULOU: I love that you brought this example because if you tread into that space—and this is something we do in psychoanalytic work all the time—you're kind of on your own. And I think that that's kind of the point. Right? And what you said about newbies—for me, that distinction is interesting because that is about how we discipline people into certain ways of conducting themselves, and then that way of conducting oneself gets internalized. I'm thinking, of course, with Foucault here, and how queer spaces are not outside of power, but very much subject to power. So to me, negotiating up means that you are now kind of on your own with another person, without certain protections of rules or safety protocols. This is a part of what it means to step out of manualized ways of doing things, in kink spaces or in psychoanalytic work, and it is one of the most powerful parallels between the two. The kinds of intimacies that get produced when you are on your own, without the bannisters of rules, with an other, when the two of you step outside the social contract—such intimacies are otherworldly. Sometimes patients talk about the loneliness of not being able to convey to others what that experience is like, but I think that this loneliness, what we may think of as a noncommunicable experience, is part of what makes it also so precious. But such intimacy, meaningful though it may be, can also bear on the intimacy of what gets experienced as violence or exploitation. One way to think about rules and protocols is that it's the community marking the line beyond which you are on your own, as if the community is saying, "you want

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to go there, we are not coming with you." So if you're going to go there, you know that you're going without protections—and that's a volatile space, because abuse and violation is also what can happen in that space, which is a good reason why people don't risk it, though that's not the same as saying that people shouldn't.

FIELDING: Yeah, or to bring back something that you said at the beginning of the conversation, the idea that you're going up to the line and you're peering over the cliff, you know, and you have that choice. Well, actually, you don't have a choice. It really does feel like being pulled.

SAKETOPOULOU: There's an exigency. There's an exigency of the drive that has nothing to do with consent. You meet it too late for you to control it.

WARZER: Connecting it back to what we were talking about earlier, about being in solidarity politically, it seems that there's a lot that we lose when we're not willing to lose something. There's a lot that we lose when we are not willing to step into that place of the unknown with ourselves and with others.

SAKETOPOULOU: But to me, it's very important to not turn any of that into the right way to be a pervert or the right way to be a clinician. Otherwise, it completely loses any possibility of acting on you and of you acting on it. It becomes yet another axiomatic criterion to live up to.

WARZER: Well, unfortunately, I think it is sometimes taken up in that way. I was in a workshop last night with Empress Wu, and someone asked, "how do you confirm that you're doing solidarity in kink?" On the one hand, the concept is shifting us away from this manualized, box-checking way of approaching kink. And yet people want to check the box of doing solidarity. Or at least, perhaps understandably, want to know how to evaluate whether that is something they are engaged with.

FIELDING: It's really hard because I do feel that pull of like, "give me a recipe book about how you do this." I empathize with it, but also, I don't even wish I could give someone the recipe book.

SAKETOPOULOU: I actually don't empathize with it. I don't feel empathic about that at all. I had a lot of people come to me for supervision after my book came out saying, "Teach me how to work traumatophilically." And, you know, I think invariably when somebody says, "teach me how to do that," it's still about safety, like how do I stay within the lines? It is a different form of asking for mastery, perhaps even for a Master. But, for me, you really have to do it for yourself. You really have to test it for yourself, including fail at it yourself. This is why I love Foucault not giving us a way of doing things, which is not to say that he does not also piss me off. Laplanche does the same, he refuses to write about clinical material, which is a source of endless frustration to people who feel they want to use his ideas but don't know how to "apply" them. And the answer we are left with from both of them is, you really do have to figure it out for yourself. You're going to have to do something. But how do I do it? How do I know if I do it correctly, or if I do it in a way that's problematic? You're going to find out, but for that, you will have to be willing to risk. And that's going to cost you.

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