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William Seabrook and Man Ray. Visualizing Sadomasochistic Intersubjectivity

ABSTRACT: Around 1929-1930 writer William Seabrook commissioned from Man Ray three sets of photographs. One set showed Seabrook himself mimicking S/M interactions with Lee Miller; another group was *tableaux vivants* visualizing Seabrook's fetishistic fantasies; the third set consisted of portraits of Seabrook's partner (Marjorie Worthington) wearing a collar especially designed by Man Ray. These series, along with other related works (such as Seabrook's photographs of a female partner sheathed in a black leather mask, published in surrealist journals *Documents* and *VVV*), offer a seemingly abusive iconography of female subjection for the sake of male gratification. However, delving into the intellectual environment that aggregated Man Ray, Seabrook, and the surrealists of *Documents*, this article seeks to read the pictorial corpus as visualizations of interpersonal interactions that approximate the protocol of today's BDSM. The body of work is indeed imbued with motifs of primitivism, orientalism and *négrophilie* that were rampant in vanguard elites around 1930. Seabrook's fetishistic objects and practices were not alien to racial bias, and gendered unbalance of power. Yet, while these experiments seem to debase the female partners into objects of erotic mechanics, most of them were consensual and performative and bear witness to personal search for modernist transcendence and spiritual epiphany.

KEYWORDS: Man Ray; William Seabrook; Sadomasochism; BDSM; Deborah Luris/Justine; Lee Miller; Michel Leiris.

During some of their visits to Paris in 1929 and 1930, breaking away from their regular residence in Toulon (in the South of France) or stopping over on their way to and from New York, writer William Seabrook (1884-1945) and his partner, novelist Marjorie Worthington (1900-1976), involved photographers Man Ray (1890-1976) and Lee Miller (1907-1977), then lovers, in the production of three series of photographs centered on sadomasochist fantasies and fetishism. Integral to this corpus are pictures taken around the same time by Seabrook, presumably in New York, and by Man Ray (or his assistant Jacques-André Boiffard) in Paris, of a woman known under the pseudonym Justine (most likely Deborah Luris, as I will explain). Taken at face value, these pictures deploy a disturbing iconography of abuse. However, evidence from Seabrook's, Worthington's and Man Ray's

autobiographies allow us to reframe them within the ethical perimeter of Sodomasochist relationalities (henceforth S/M), inflected by personal blends of primitivist fantasies and the search for spiritual epiphany or mysticism. I would argue that the set of hybrid experiences described in this essay, oscillating between erotic gratification, self-indulgence and the modernist quest for transcendence, may be read through the lens of what is now known as BDSM¹ subculture, of which this corpus can be considered a historical, embryonic precursor *avant la lettre*. The pictures offer a glimpse into a range of consensual practices (if at times unbalanced), either lived or staged, whereby erotic-psychological pleasure and exploration into the Self—constituted as relational—conflate. According to well-established definitions in non-medical scholarship, the S/M relationship is a safe, sane, consensual, time-limited, constructed performance of role-playing in which participants transform what *appears* to be violence into pleasurable, reciprocal empowerment².

The trigger and pivot of this ensemble was Seabrook, then well-known for the accounts of his explorations in the Middle East (*Adventures in Arabia*, published in New York in 1927) and Haiti (*The Magic Island*, 1929), replete with ethnographic descriptions of esoteric or ancestral rituals. The photographs became known only after the negatives were accessioned by the Musée National d'Art Moderne of Paris in 1994. Man Ray never exhibited them during his lifetime, and they remained the documentation of private fantasies. Antony Penrose, Lee Miller's son, considers the photos as "a private transaction" between Man Ray and Seabrook as the client; he has argued that they went straight into the latter's private collection, and Man Ray "would not have wanted to get a reputation for shooting risqué assignments"³. However, Man Ray established an amicable relationship with both Seabrook and Worthington, attested by correspondence and Man Ray's autobiography. The involvement of Man Ray and Miller in the pictorial representation of S/M dynamics for—or with—Seabrook,

¹ Bondage and Domination/Discipline, Dominance and Submission, Sadism and Masochism. I am sincerely grateful to my friend Susan Power for her valuable comments and suggestions in editing this text.

² For a broader discussion on S/M, within the spectrum of BDSM practices, see: Langdridge and BAKER 2007; and FUSILLO 2020: 323-332.

³ Antony Penrose to the author, email, February 1, 2021. William K. Seabrook (the writer's son) informed me that the original prints—and the collars or other objects depicted in the photographs, or mentioned in Seabrook's writings—are lost: email, December 23, 2020.

alongside their watching similar interactions with other individuals (including a paid woman whom Man Ray and Miller ‘dog-sat’ one night on behalf of Seabrook, while the writer was absent) suggest at least an untroubled awareness as to the nature of Seabrook’s S/M world. Moreover, the photographs reconnect to other motifs of bondage and submission in Man Ray’s oeuvre and his enduring fascination with the Marquis Donatien-Alphonse-François de Sade. While Man Ray might have been cautious about his public respectability as a fashion photographer or portraitist for an affluent clientele, he was no stranger to more risqué images destined for a smaller vanguard audience, such as the blatantly pornographic takes of coitus and fellatio published in Benjamin Peret’s and Louis Aragon’s booklet of erotic poetry, 1929 (PÉRET and ARAGON 1929). Around the time of the Seabrook commission, Man Ray and Lee Miller were autonomously exploring, either in private or public photographs (published in Surrealist journals), forms of ‘perverse’ eroticism, i.e. alternatives to genital heterosexuality. These include gestures of lesbian love, or a blasphemous allusion to anal sexuality, such as Man Ray’s *Monument à D.A.F. de Sade*, 1933, appearing in *Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution*, May 1933, where the buttocks of a female model are inscribed within the outline of an inverted Christian cross. Man Ray published in the said periodical also *Hommage à D.A.F. de Sade* (no. 2, October 1930), a photomontage showing the beheaded and blindfolded head of a woman resting under a glass bell on top of a piece of furniture, and Lee Miller reinterpreted that iconography the same year: *Head (Tanja Ramn) in Bell Jar*. Self-expression through any forms of erotic perversion (including fetichism, sadomasochism, ‘bestiality’, ‘erotomania’) were debated in the sessions of self-consciousness held by the Surrealists (mostly male) between 1928 and 1932, in some of which Man Ray also participated. On the other hand, the explicitly or more cryptically sadistic iconography in Man Ray’s work of this period, even specifically in the relationship with Lee Miller, has been the subject of analysis in light of episodes of sadistic impulses emerging in the photographer’s autobiographical writings⁴.

⁴ For a focus on Man Ray’s and Lee Miller’s work on ‘perverse’, non-normative sexuality, see LYFORD 2007: 115-64. A complementary reading of the pictorial body of work examined here—from a perspective encompassing the intellectual reevaluation of Marquis de Sade in Surrealist circles around 1930—is offered by CORTESINI 2021. On Man Ray’s *Object to be destroyed* and the artist’s sadistic impulses, cf. also MILEAF 2004.

The photographs commissioned or made by Seabrook circulated within a milieu of bohemian-cum-cosmopolitan white intellectuals or artists, engaged in open intimate relationships, whose forays into personal eroticism were partially inflected by the colonialist discourses of orientalism, primitivism, and *négrophilie*, rampant in New York and Paris of the 1920s, often tinted with then unacknowledged racial bias⁵. They conceptualized the Arab world or Africanness as the antithesis of (and remedy to) modern rationalism and nurtured simplistic ideas of human/spiritual reinvigoration and reversion from a soulless western civilization. In the course of experiments probing their erotic fantasies, Seabrook and Luris—the couple most deeply involved in this story—drew inspiration from rituals or objects which Seabrook had observed, and often collected, during his travels. The writer conflated them with other sources: sadistic motifs in western artistic iconography, the fascination with magic and the ‘mysteries’ of Africa, then popularized by writers such as Paul Morand, and the imagery and objects shared within the then embryonic network of individuals involved in sadomasochism in Paris. Seabrook’s ethnographic-erotic experiences came under the radar of Michel Leiris, editorial secretary of the journal *Documents*, and were reframed within its ‘surrealist ethnology’, one that mixed speculations into the Primitive, religion, psyche, art, as a means of a radical anti-bourgeois critique.

The performative—not ontological—animalization or enslavement typical of sadomasochistic interactions (whereby the ‘passive’ partner is seemingly downgraded to the role of puppy or slave) and objectification (intrinsic to fetishism and practices inducing extracorporeal sensation, or the effacement of individual identity under masks) seem to vilify human sovereignty. Yet, they were experimented, or philosophically celebrated, by Seabrook and some of the Surrealists as instances of revitalized, if socially renegade, humanness, achieved through bodily sensations (or desensitization), transgressions of taboos, even mystical transcendence.

Most of the practices documented in the photographs imply Seabrook’s dominant position over submissive women (usually young and scantily dressed), thus apparently echoing social scripts of male empowerment and a gendered imbalance of agency. They alert us to a potentially asymmetrical

⁵ ZIEGER 2012. For a broader analysis of the Franco-American cultural phenomenon of primitivism and *négrophilie* in 1920’s Paris, see the fundamental ARCHER-STRAW 2000.

participatory humanity and self-realization, arguing that such experiences on Seabrook's part might have come at the expense of the liberty of others. Seabrook and Worthington—as much as their autobiographies reveal about their political considerations or feelings—did not substantially diverge from the gender psychology and social behaviors of their own generation. Cultural patterns certainly inflect the phantasmal world and language. In an article in *Documents* stemming from the images of Luris performing edgy S/M sessions, Leiris characterized the woman as “La femme de l’alchimiste”, thus claiming that the male partner functions as a transformative and creative agent on his malleable and passive female partner (LEIRIS 1930). Yet, to some extent, the intimate relationality established by Seabrook and Luris remains inaccessible to the historian and cannot be generalized. We do know, however, (if only from Seabrook's writings), that the S/M-like protocol that Seabrook and Luris practiced, while appropriating the iconography and scripts of dominance/subservience, operated to undo them through their very acting out: “in our experiments, if they can be dignified with such appellation, in the ‘games’ we played and fantasies we indulged” (SEABROOK 1941: 216). The phantasmal, as opposed to the real, is key to my understanding. The same consensual, theatrical protocol shapes today's S/M within the broader BDSM landscape. Participants allow themselves to explore desires, psychic interconnection, and the potentialities of the human mind in states of physical strain, whereby the social scripts related to sex, gender, race, age, are deconstructed in a queering space. For many S/Mers in a dominant role, *providing* pleasure is the arousal, as much as *experiencing* pleasure is key to their submissive partners, and this is antithetical to real coercion, torture, and rape. S/M arousal is related to the idea of receiving and yielding pleasure, responsibility and care, in a mirror effect of empathic identification, sometimes based on other/previous experiences in the switched role, in an often cathartic outcome, tenderness, and discussion. All of these elements are explicit, or can be inferred, in Seabrook's account of his relationship with Luris and other anonymous partners (such as the ‘quaker woman’ with whom Seabrook engaged in experiments eliciting extra-sensorial, quasi-mystical sensations in 1940, as I will describe later).

1. CORPUS

Seabrook had harbored deep-seated fantasies of restraining women with chains on and off since childhood and had nurtured them through art history books found in his paternal home, replete with images of Andromeda,

Boadicea, Saint Joan of Arc, and other mythological or historical figures (SEABROOK 1942: 26-28; 53-54). Sometime around 1922, Seabrook disclosed his desires to Deborah Luris, a well-to-do puppeteer whom he had met in New York's Greenwich Village. "She suggested that [...] Hammacher-Schlemmer [a famous hardware store] would be a good place to get whatever locks and chains 'we' needed" (SEABROOK 1942: 175), Seabrook recalled, and thenceforth they started a relationship leading to progressively intensified S/M experiences which lasted at least until 1931.

In *Witchcraft* (1940) (where Luris's identity is concealed behind the pseudonym Justine) and in the rather confessional autobiography *No Hiding Place* (1942), Seabrook described the experiential nature of the relationship with Luris, one based on consensual desires to discover new territories of non-genital sexuality. They recast erotic power as a psychological bond of mutual trust, sensitization of Luris's body parts (in prolonged constricted poses, for example), enhancement—or, conversely, desensitization—of discrete senses (hearing, feeling). Seabrook's narrative stresses the empirical, collaborative, and reciprocal dimension to their ventures in edgy erotic and cognitive fields: "we played the game that she was not permitted to use the hands"; "our discovery"; "we tried some experiments with sound and hearing"; "in the field of light waves [...] Justine and I made better progress, and got a lot of interesting results"; "We were a couple of cuckoos, tired of monotony, and making our own little play worlds to live in. [...] The erotic fun we got out of it was strictly our own business" (SEABROOK 1941, quotes respectively: 217, 218, 218, 219, 217). Yet, they were public about their experiments, enjoying themselves at Central Park, in restaurants, or the tea-room of the Saint Regis hotel while Luris had her arms restrained by chains all along.

The series of 'adventures in Arabia' that Seabrook went through in 1925 (as he traveled as a guest of various tribal chiefs or notables across the Middle East, from Lebanon to Baghdad and Kurdistan) seemed to amount to displacements in space and time ("In fleeing into the desert, I had fled into the past. I had gone back three thousand years": SEABROOK 1942: 253). While enriching his ethnographic knowledge, the rituals and objects also fomented Seabrook's own psychic fantasies; later, he and Luris reinvested them in their own erotic explorations. Seabrook claimed to have undergone a 'novitiate' of the Rifa'i sect of the Dervish fraternity in a monastery in Tripoli, Syria in 1925; his observation of rituals of self-mortification and

infliction of pain performed by the initiates of the sect led Seabrook and Luris from 1926 to appropriate and superficially replicate similar practices, and specifically the ‘dervish dangling’. She would hang herself for hours by a chain around one or both wrists, in order to achieve *melboos* (the mystical state), which is a hallucinatory level of physical exhaustion that provoked the detachment of her subjective self from the sensory envelop of the body and elicited reportedly pleasurable wanderings of the mind, mental visions and even what seemed instances of clairvoyance (SEABROOK 1927: 274-76 on *melboos*; SEABROOK 1941: 206). “Justine and I had long talks about it” (the slits in time/space), Seabrook wrote. He and Luris pushed their limits as much for the flow of psychic-erotic energy as out of scientific curiosity: “we both knew what we were about, and we both liked it. We were in love with each other, and if we hadn’t enjoyed the games we played we’d certainly never have gone to all that unselfish trouble for [...] so doubtful a new scientific field as extra-sensory perception” (SEABROOK 1941: 207). In the various attempts to dull the senses, they invented a full-face mask (“the mask we finally devised was partly my idea, and partly hers”), and had it made in glacé kid by a glove maker in New York (SEABROOK 1941: 220). Seabrook took three photographs of these sessions with Luris/Justine under various masks, which Michel Leiris published in *Documents* (1930) in an essay that I will discuss later. Another set of photographs (at least three shots are known) which document a similar situation—a young, bare-chested woman, her head concealed under a full balaclava, and wearing a polished steel collar—is attributed to Man Ray (or to Jacques-André Boiffard, then his assistant), and dated 1930. One of these prints, now at the J. Paul Getty Museum, and bearing on the verso the inscription “Dervish dangling. Seabrook. Photo by Man Ray”, is a close-up taken, arguably, if we are to believe the annotation, when Luris visited Seabrook in France around 1930 (Fig. 1).

Her gloved arms are handcuffed and hoisted, her head shrouded in the balaclava, and the photographic lens sets her against the blurred background as an uncanny human being transformed into a mannequin. Whether Man Ray attended one of Seabrook’s sessions or not, the iconography must have been inspiring, because he referenced it in later sculptures equally toying with de-humanization associated with BDSM, especially *Domesticated Virgin* (1960), and *Undomesticated Virgin* (1964)—small mannequins attached to chains in wooden boxes, the “domesticated” one hoisted like Justine (Fig. 2).

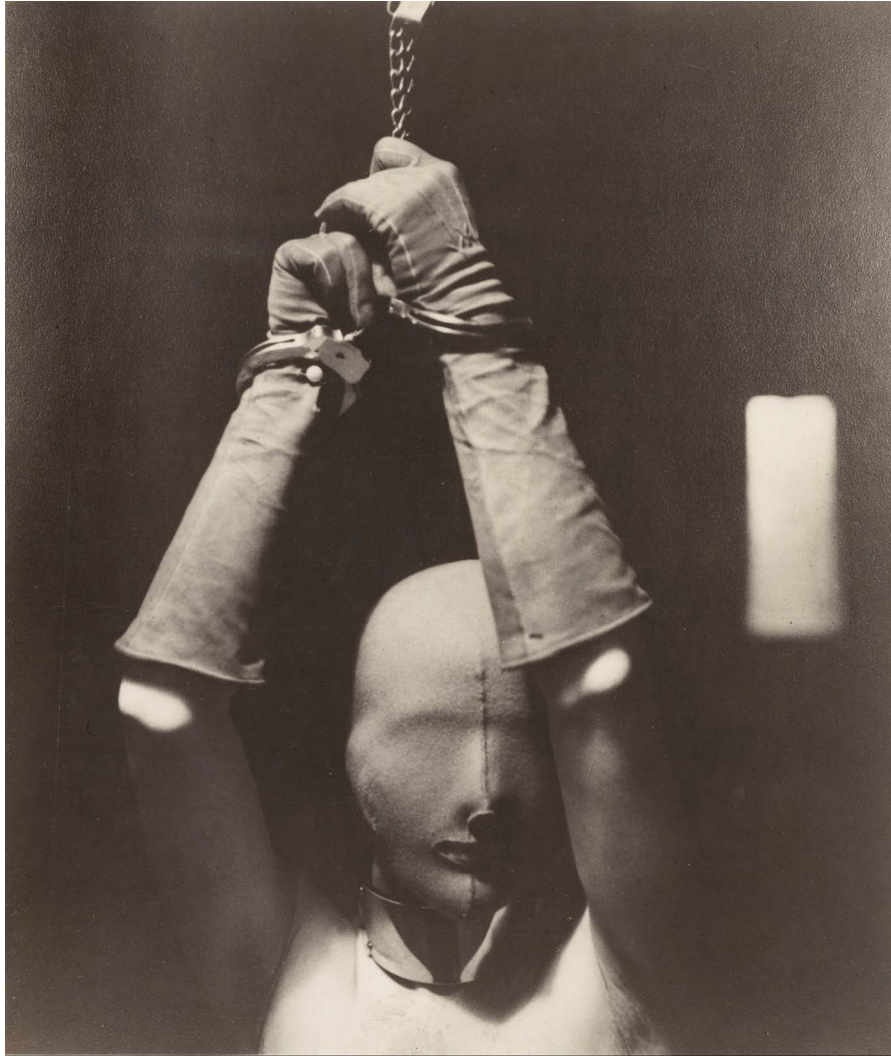


FIGURE 1. Man Ray (attributed); or Jacques-André Boiffard (attributed) or William Seabrook (?), [Gloved figure], 1930 ca, gelatin silver print, 22.7 × 18.7 cm, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles © Man Ray Trust ARS-ADAGP.

Around 1929 the lives of Seabrook, Worthington, Man Ray, and Lee Miller intersected. Seabrook was at the apex of success. *The Magic Island*, published in New York in January 1929, and containing a chapter reporting his participation in frantic, blood-shedding voodoo rituals in Haiti, catapulted Seabrook to fame. As of September, he was in Paris ready to embark on a journey through Western French Africa, from the Ivory Coast up to Timbuktu, on the track of the historical roots of voodooism, determined to mingle with tribal groups, and even share a cannibalistic meal (the account of these travels, *Jungle Ways*, was released in April 1931)⁶. Before leaving, Seabrook commissioned from Man Ray a high silver

⁶ Seabrook *did* taste human flesh, but in Paris, in Spring 1930, obtained illegally from the morgue from the corpse of a youth killed in a traffic accident; cf. WORTHINGTON 2017: 67-78.



FIGURE 2. Man Ray, *Vierge apprivoisée (Domesticated Virgin)*, wood, 50 cm; photo: silver gelatin negative on nitrate support (image obtained by tonal inversion), 1960, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris © Man Ray Trust / Adagp, Paris.

collar for Worthington, which followed the line of her neck up to the chin, forcing her to keep her head up high and impeding her movement. Writing from Timbuktu on January 1st, 1930, Seabrook assured Man Ray that the collar “created a *furore* [sic] in N.Y. Will do some more stuff next summer”.⁷ Worthington wore the constrictive ornament, at home and on some social occasions, to please Seabrook who “took a certain pleasure in watching her at the table eating and drinking with difficulty” (MAN RAY 1963: 193). Man Ray may also have provided additional items: Worthington was reportedly wearing a bracelet in 1934 when she visited Seabrook in the asylum where the writer was treating his alcoholism, and recalled “how Man Ray had helped us design the bracelet in Paris, and how the

⁷ William Seabrook to Man Ray, January 1 (1930), quoted in MILEAF 2004: 18.

little silversmith [...] had made three trips by bus across to Montparnasse with soft zinc models and his satchelful of Lilliputian anvils and hammers, before it got it to fit just right” (SEABROOK 1935: 205). Only one collar is however documented in the seven portraits that Man Ray took of Worthington. The description of the collar that Man Ray gave in his autobiography matches loosely the surviving image: “two hinged pieces of dull silver studded with shiny knobs that snapped into place”. Moreover, in a color photograph published by *Click* magazine in 1942, we see one of Seabrook’s later masochistic partners wearing the collar, previously owned by Worthington, but also a matching belt (Fig. 3).



FIGURE 3. (left) *Immobile, seeing and hearing nothing for 48 hours, this girl seeks entrance in her mind’s world—behind the mask*, in “Can Science Guide Man’s Mind into the Future?”, in *Click: The National Picture Monthly*, volume 5, n. 11, November 1942: 27.

FIGURE 4. (right) Man Ray, *Marjorie Muir Worthington*, 1930 ca, gelatin silver print, 8.5 x 5.7 cm, Musée National d’Art Moderne, Paris, © Man Ray Trust / Adagp, Paris. Crédit photographique : © Philippe Migeat - Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI /Dist. RMN-GP.



FIGURE 5. Man Ray, *Marjorie Muir Worthington*, 1930 ca, silver gelatin negative on glass plate (image obtained by tonal inversion), 9 x 6 cm, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris. © Man Ray Trust / Adagp, Paris. The detail shows a pseudo-Arabic calligraphy, possibly including a badly transliterated name Marjorie.

If we observe the whole photographic shooting (Figs. 4 and 5), where Worthington displays the collar as an accessory to three combinations of her outfit (the series may virtually start with Worthington wearing a turban cloche hat and a lady's suit while smoking a cigarette, then unfolds with four pictures where she has removed the hat but keeps a blazer on, and two final images where she reveals her blouse), we may argue that Worthington deployed, in cooperation with Man Ray, a coded set of references. The vertical plates of the collar harmonize with Worthington's slender figure and its primitivistic and armored look clashes with her uncoquettish attire and sober femininity. Worthington's short, combed-back haircut, the light makeup that did not dissimulate the dark circles, and the blazer or blouse that softly concealed her body conveyed the image of a modern and demure urbanite, but the peculiar embroidered or stitched signs below the V neck of the blouse look like a pseudo-Arabic calligraphy. With a stretch of the imagination, one may decipher from it a

badly-transliterated name Marjorie, inscribed within a larger lam-alif ligature of letters (لا), while other signs remain unclear⁸. The embroidery may have been produced by a non-Arabic person incorrectly copying from an Arabic inscription, but in wearing the blouse, or suit, in combination with the collar, Worthington went along with Seabrook's fusion of orientalist imaginary and erotic fetishism, as well as with the persuasion that a modern lifestyle (indexed by the lady's suit, cloche hat and cigarette) and primitive essence (indexed by the 'primitivist' collar) may coexist.

As late as December 1941, the collar was still celebrated in New York's art-minded circles, and this may signal a protracted use: Man Ray wrote to Worthington, "Even the story: that I have designed some special jewelry for you, is known [...]. [S]ome woman keeps showing me her oriental collection, asking for suggestions to transform it. Perhaps I could do something if I had you [...] to inspire me"⁹. However, unlike Luris, Worthington probably just consented to wear the ornament more than enjoying it. In her autobiography (1966), she evoked Seabrook's 'strange world' in pages at times intensely romantic and nostalgic, revealing her jealousy and dependency on their bond: "I loved Willie. That was something intricately bound up with the breath I breathed and the blood that channeled its way in and out of my heart, that only death could put an end to it". Yet, "I was totally unsympathetic with the whole business of chains and leather masks and the rest of the fantasies that were so important to him", and that was one of the reasons she had "put up with a series of Mimis and others, for whom I had a generic name, 'Lizzie in Chains'" (WORTHINGTON 2017: 136; 180).

Seabrook went public with his hired women. One night he asked Man Ray and Lee Miller to watch over one "hired girl" chained like a dog to the banisters of his duplex in a Montparnasse hotel, while he and Worthington dined out (RAY 1963: 191-195). Worthington reported that after returning to Paris from another 'ethnographic mission' to Timbuktu in February 1932 (in preparation for the next book, *The White Monk of Timbuctoo*, 1934) the writer threw a party for notables connected with the Trocadéro museum in a hotel suite where he exhibited the aforementioned Mimi. She was chained

⁸ I thank Daniele Mascitelli and Renata Pepicelli for their attempt to decipher the inscription, which however may ultimately be just a pseudo-Arabic decoration, made by a non-Arabic embroiderer. One may extrapolate from the calligraphy a 90-degree angle tilted MaRJuRY (مرجري) encircled by a lam-alif combination of letters.

⁹ Man Ray to Marjorie Worthington, December 24, 1941, quoted in MILEAF 2004: 19.



FIGURE 6. Man Ray, *Lee Miller, William Seabrook*, ca 1929-32, gelatin silver negative on flexible nitrate support (image obtained by tonal inversion), 9 x 6 cm, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Parigi. © Man Ray Trust / Adagp.

by her wrists to the balcony above, naked from the waist up and wearing a leather skirt that Seabrook had brought from Africa. None of the guests, including Leiris, objected (WORTHINGTON 2017: 143-44).

Worthington's dubious satisfaction at wearing the collar (an item unmentioned in her autobiography), and the undocumented feelings of the paid sex workers, differentiate these experiences from the more genuine S/M relationship between Luris and Seabrook. Another, yet differently nuanced, interaction occurs in the sadomasochistic attitudes mimicked by Miller and Seabrook for Man Ray's camera. In three pictures, Miller sits behind a desk and sports the same polished metal collar (once worn by Luris/Justine in Figure 1 discussed above) as an unusual complement to her plain blouse. In another shot, Seabrook admiringly holds a lock of Miller's hair, and in two more images he grabs her by the collar (Fig. 6).

In this more aesthetically studied ensemble, Man Ray set the lights to create multiple shadows, which are very evocative, or an effect of backlight

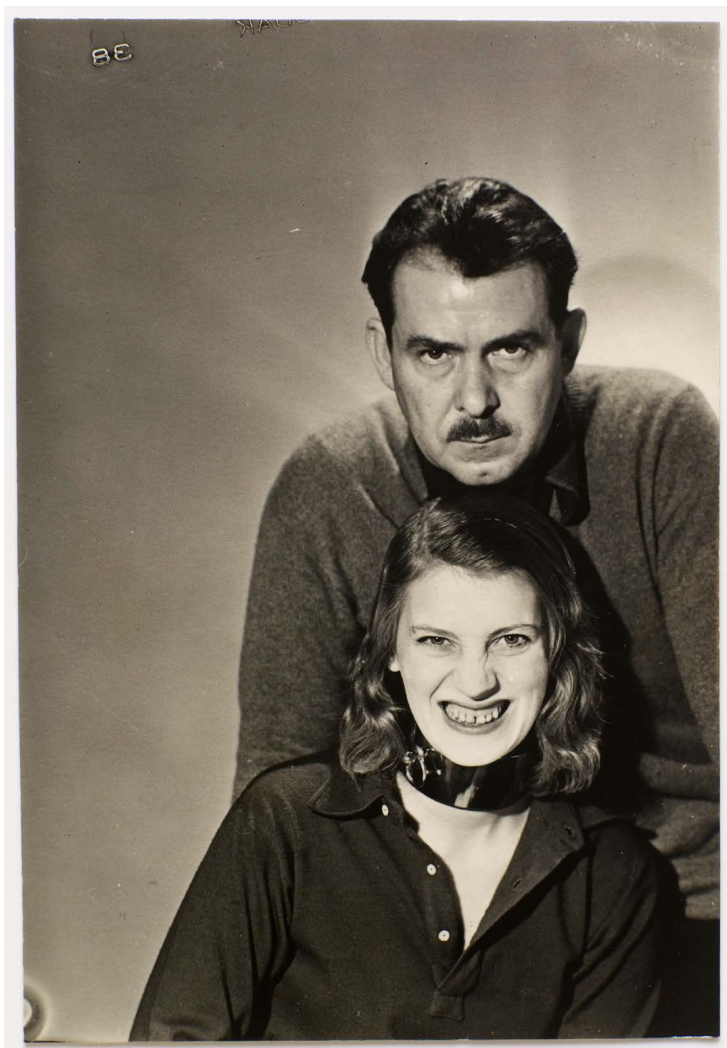


FIGURE 7. Man Ray, *Lee Miller au collier*, 1930 ca, gelatin silver print on paper, 8,5 x 5,5 cm, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris. © Man Ray Trust / Adagp; crédit photographique © Georges Meguerditchian—Centre Pompidou.

radiating from behind Miller's head, as if accentuating her fetishistic allure. Miller lived with Man Ray in a non-monogamous relationship, upholding the principle of free love. As Antony Penrose reports, "she rarely allowed loyalty to a current lover to conflict with her sexual desires, stating that she went to bed with whoever she chose", exposing "the hypocrisy of the doctrine of free love" largely constructed from the male standpoint, much to Man Ray's chagrin (PENROSE 1985: 23). Alongside Seabrook, she did not enact the cliché of the beautiful prey. In one picture the couple looks straight into the camera and they both convey a kind of tension. She shows theatrically gritted teeth, and seems defiant rather than compliant. If we reconsider this last shot within the whole set of photos, Miller's growling back at the camera may suggest her affirmative determination to yield to sadomasochistic interplay, and possibly switch roles, rather than unquestionably assuming the role of the subject (Fig. 7).¹⁰

¹⁰ For a more expanded analysis, see LYFORD 2007: 163.



FIGURE 8. Man Ray, *Nu suspendu*, 1930 ca, gelatin silver print, 10,5 x 6,9 cm, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris. Crédit photographique : © Service de la documentation photographique du MNAM - Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI /Dist. RMN-GP.

In Spring 1930, most likely, Man Ray realized the nine photographic plates titled *Les fantasies de M. Seabrook*. In the photographer's apartment-studio, one young woman appears subjected to various 'tortures'. Her arms are held behind her back by a rope, attached to the wrists, and hoisted to the point that she is forced to bend over and stand on tiptoes (the uncomfortable position looks like a variation on the 'dervish dangling' example) (Fig. 8). In other pictures, she lays on the floor, her ankles, thighs, waist, wrists bound by leather straps attached to a collar with large metal studs. Two dominatrixes torment her. One is bare-chested but wears a set of black leather garments: eye-mask, bandanna, skirt, bicep-high gloves, and knee-high boots. She canes the 'bottom' (I'm using here current BDSM jargon) (Fig. 9); in another picture, she pulls the bottom's hair and forces her gloved hand into the other's mouth; in a third one, she pinches the nipple with a plier. In the broader views of the set (Fig. 10), the 'slave' is on the floor—her legs and arms spread open by ropes; the leather-clad mistress



FIGURE 9. Man Ray, *Mise en scène fétichiste pour William Seabrook*, ca 1930, gelatin silver negative on flexible nitrate support (image obtained by tonal inversion), 11 x 8 cm, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris.

tortures a nipple, while another dominatrix wearing a Buccaneer or Gypsy outfit pokes a screwdriver into the vulva or breast.

Man Ray used dramatic lighting effects (a spotlight on the floor casts imposing shadows of the performers onto the walls), and this series lacks the neutral ambiance of other studio photographs. The perspective—often looking down on the victim, from a subjective angle associated with the controlling gaze of a master/mistress—reveals a messy theater of action that accounts for the performative eventfulness of the session: handcuffs, straps, and buckles, hardware tools and clothes, appear scattered or piled up in a corner. These photographs are *tableaux vivants*, not documentary. There is no real cruelty. Man Ray and Seabrook had models perform a script, staging scenes with some lamps and costumes borrowed from an everyday or literary culture of power, decontextualized in a rather improvised



FIGURE 10. Man Ray, *Mise en scène fétichiste pour William Seabrook*, ca 1930, gelatin silver negative on flexible nitrate support (image obtained by tonal inversion), 8 x 11 cm, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris.

‘theater of conversion’ that transmutes the social meaning¹¹. A shopping list sent by Seabrook in anticipation of another photo shoot, the corresponding images of which are not yet known, corroborates the constructed dimensions of these projects: “I’ve got some additional tentative ideas to go along with the black mask. A black priest’s robe and a priest’s shovel hat [...] Concealed beneath it a wasp-waist hour-glass corset finished either in some glittering fabric that looks like polished steel, or in black leatherlike material to match the mask. Also boots or slippers with fantastically high heels. So if you will be thinking of where you might send me to order these various things, in addition to the two we spoke of yesterday, I will be much obliged. I’ll bring the young woman by your studio [...] around five-thirty this afternoon”¹².

¹¹ “With its exaggerated emphasis on costume and scene S/M performs social power as scripted, and hence as permanently subject to change. As a theatre of conversion, S/M reverses and transmutes the social meaning it borrows”: McCLINTOCK 2003: 238; see also FUSILLO 2020: 326.

¹² William Seabrook to Man Ray, undated (1930), quoted in MILEAF 2004: 19.

This ensemble crystallized various cultural sources and personal experiences drawn from Seabrook's meandering across the world and explorations into the human mind. The scenes of captive women encapsulate memories of popular fiction stories of pirate adventures, and also revisited the 'masquerades', or costume dances, given by prosperous artists in the Greenwich Village in the 1920s, whereby exotic and erotic fantasies passed unnoticed under the pretext of literary or art-historical references. Seabrook, disguised as a Barbary corsair, had brought to one of such parties Deborah Luris dressed as a slave, with chained hands and hooked to a dog chain by a wide silver belt around her waist (SEABROOK 1942: 200). The photographs are also replete with paraphernalia of fetishistic eroticism, echoing the imagery of the underground Parisian scene of 'flagellation brothels' (also catering to male masochists), sex-shops, *maisons* of fetishistic lingerie, amateur and professional photographers specializing in a variety of subjects—from 'artistic' to pornographic—which constituted the embryo of a queer S/M network (cf. DUPOUY 2019: 100-111). Paris was less censorial than the United States; "here you could buy the most outrageously pornographic books right out on the street", as Worthington reported, and Seabrook patronized the bookstores of the Palais-Royal "that catered exclusively to strange forms of eroticism" (WORTHINGTON 2017: 150-51, 180). Rather than positing *Les fantasies de M. Seabrook* as an objectification of women from the male gaze, and lesbian interplay as male heterosexual imagery, with the inference that *as such* they reflect and instill patriarchal attitudes, I would underscore that Seabrook and Man Ray engaged women to emphatically act out—to the point of masquerade—the male-active and female-passive polarity¹³. Alongside the photographs featuring Miller and Seabrook, *Les fantasies* fits within the broader mosaic of visuals queering the nexus of gendered/biological sexuality.

2. PLEASURE, DE-SUBJECTIVATION, MYSTICISM

Mastering basic Arabic, Creole, and West African dialects, and living for a few months amidst groups of peasants, herd-farmers or warriors far removed from money-driven Western society, Seabrook tried to negotiate between his roles of foreign observer and participant guest. He was

¹³ For a broader discussion about S/M pornography and the concerns of feminist film theorists, see: WILLIAMS 1999: 184-228.

reportedly saluted as a white man turned native in Northern Arabia, or Haiti, or as *Mogo-Dieman* (“the-black-man-who-has-a-white-face”) in Africa. As he enriched his exposure to all sorts of feudal or tribal social norms, (including enslavement, male polygamy, subservience of women in Islamic countries, or conversely, women’s sexual autonomy among the Dogon in Western Africa), Seabrook integrated the ethnographic discoveries into his own agenda of fetishistic fantasies. Among the Bedouins in Arabia, he had accepted the ‘gift’ of a concubine, Anisha, from the Ouled Nail tribe, whom he “loaded [...] with heavy silver bangles, bracelets, chains and anklets” (SEABROOK 1942: 242). Then, back in New York, he presented Luris with “nigh to a hundred pounds of silver bracelets, collars, anklets, chains picked up in the bazaars of Stamboul and Tabriz”, to add to her sadomasochistic implements (SEABROOK 1942: 254). Upon meeting Worthington (probably late in 1928), he characterized her as “a Scheherazade [...] in a Greenwich Village basement”, and the collar elaborated by Man Ray must have made a special addition to the writer’s collection of “brass and silver bracelets, the leather amulets, the carved African masks and fetishes” (SEABROOK 1942: 290; WORTHINGTON 2017: 23). Modern fetishistic garments and original ethnic items were interchangeable, in Seabrook’s mental playground.

Despite his sympathy for various black individuals, including the priestess Wamba in Africa, and Maman Célie in Haiti (his initiator into the voodoo cult), and reiterated reproof of the segregation of African-Americans in his own country (he was born and raised in Georgia, USA), Seabrook’s discourse remained inflected by the racist tropes which pitted an alleged white supremacy rooted in rationalism against black emotional and spiritual richness. He remarked “I have a warm feeling toward Negroes. They’re perhaps by and large less intelligent than whites—or perhaps only less well educated—inferior intellectually in general if you choose, but I often think they’re superior to us emotionally and spiritually, perhaps superior in kindness and capacity for happiness” (SEABROOK 1942: 272-273). Consequently, Seabrook—not unlike many white peers, in the years of the rampant Negrophilia craze in Paris—positioned Blackness as a reservoir of both erotic and spiritual energy against Western “soulless mechanical robots”¹⁴.

In Haiti, in 1927 Seabrook attended Lagba ceremonies and identified with their ‘savage’ worldview. He felt that participating in blood-shedding animal

¹⁴ SEABROOK 1927: 282-83.

sacrifices and trance-like possession of the prayers stirred his own soul. Seabrook claimed that the baptism in voodoo rites was akin to regaining the emotional bedrock of life and the Dionysian kernel of humanness that had formerly fueled the Greco-Roman saturnalia and still survived in the frenzied dances and saxophones in night-clubs (another primitivist trope). He also equated humans and animals on an inter-species substrate, attainable through religious rituals: the “sacrificial goat [...] with big, blue, terrified almost human eyes [...]. This goat had by now become inevitably personal to me. I had conceived an affectionate interest in him” (SEABROOK 2016: 61).

Seabrook’s orgiastic and totemic reading of voodoo rituals, entailing a loss of self and its extension onto entities other than human, aligned with the intellectual project of the Surrealist journal *Documents*—a radical attack on the idealized notions of *civilisation*, and exposure of its hidden *sauvagerie*. Upon reading the just released French translation of *The Magic Island*, Leiris in November 1929 hailed Seabrook as “the first man of white race initiated to the mysteries of Voodoo [...] loath to distinguish between [...] mysticism and eroticism”, and praised him as the daring Westerner willing to break human limits, “even if it means confusing himself with animals, plants, minerals” (LEIRIS 1929: 334).

The following year, in the article “Caput mortuum” Leiris acknowledged Seabrook as a fellow *négrofile*, eager to achieve “the abolition, by any means (mysticism, madness, adventure, poetry, eroticism..) of that unbearable duality, established [...] by our current morality, between body and soul, matter and spirit” (LEIRIS 1930: 22). The publication of three pictures of Luris/Justine sheathed in leather masks with chains or collars girding her neck (Figs. 11 and 12), sparked Leiris to wax poetic on the human’s need to obliterate individual identities in order to achieve totemic otherness.

Leiris conceded that in fetishistic and sadomasochistic intercourse the (female) partner, deprived of intelligence, is no longer “God’s creature” and is debased to a “simple and universal erotic mechanics” (LEIRIS 1930: 25). The face-obliterating mask reduces love to “a natural and bestial process [...], gaze—that quintessence of human expression—is presently blinded [...], the mouth reduced to the animal role of a wound”. Yet, all these de-personalizing effects occasioned by the mask helped activate (Leiris claimed) the fundamental nature of eroticism: “a way out of oneself, to break the bonds imposed on you by morality, intelligence and customs, a way to ward off evil forces and to defy God”. The effacement of the human

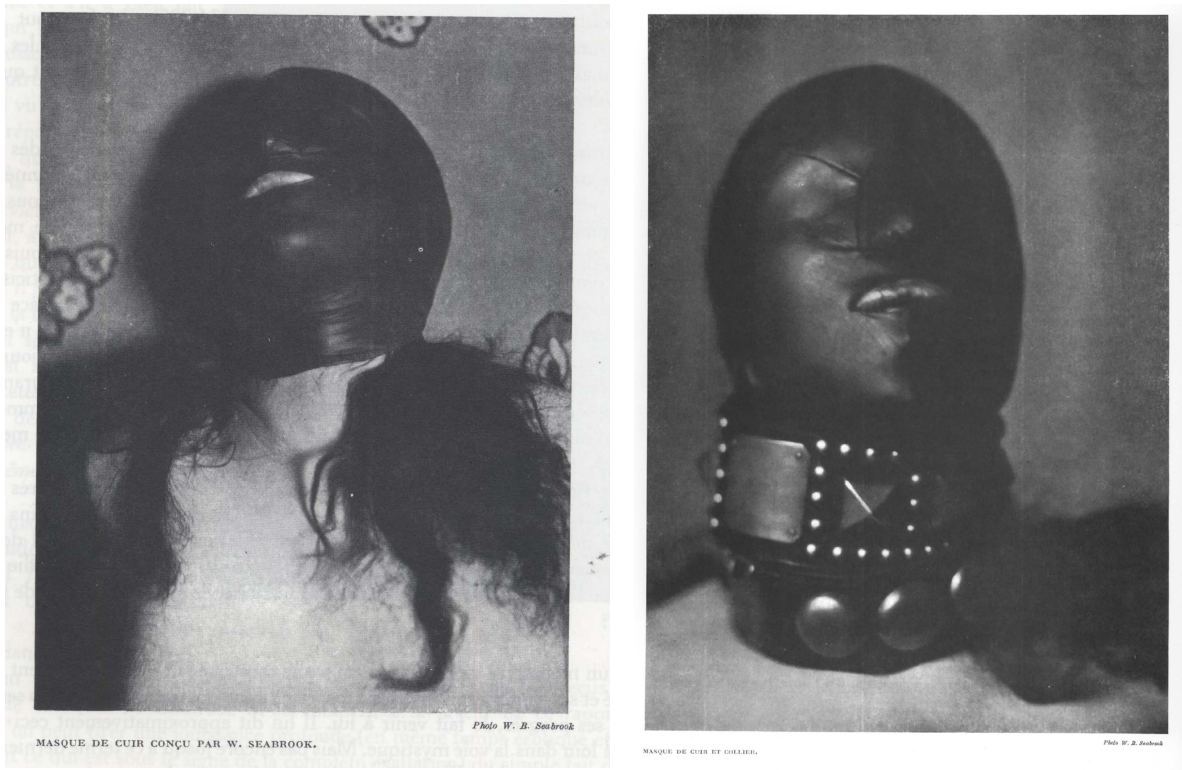


FIGURE 11. (left) William Seabrook, *Masque de cuir et collier*, ca 1929, in Michel Leiris, “Le ‘Caput mortuum’, ou la femme de l’alchimiste”, in *Documents*, 2, no. 8 (1930): 21.

FIGURE 12. (right) William Seabrook, *Masque de cuir et collier*, ca 1929, in Michel Leiris, “Le ‘Caput mortuum’, ou la femme de l’alchimiste”, in *Documents*, 2, no. 8 (1930): 24.

into “a sort of *thing in itself*, obscure, tempting and mysterious—a supreme residuum”, as Leiris put it, reveals a paradox (LEIRIS 1930: 26). It is a *caput mortuum*, i.e. the transitional stage, in alchemical terminology. This annihilation of humanness—Leiris maintained—is also empowerment against the *truly* de-humanizing metaphysical Norm. Leiris’s text echoes the glorification of ‘bestiality’ underlying civilization (by-then a commonplace for the Surrealist circle and *Documents* readers), and symbolist tropes of devilish and tempting women, simultaneously powerful and threatening elicited by Justine’s disquieting (Sphinx, or Siren-like) iconography. Leiris ultimately celebrated male self-empowerment. However, if we accept the misogynist tendencies typical of his epoch, a more updated reading may acknowledge that Leiris captured the (de)subjectivizing structure inherent in the S/M experience. Indeed, escaping rationality and the stability of the subject entail limit-experiences (*caput mortuum*, as it were). This leads to “extricate oneself from oneself”, as Michel Foucault—himself an S/Mer—remarked in the 1980s, in his elaboration of an ethics unhinged from a coherent subject and redefined as a “care of pleasures”. This new ethics does not necessarily

result in a vegetative body (NICOLINI 2020: 91-99; AGAMBEN 2014: 60-61; DOWNING 2007: 127-128). The one whose body is acted upon, in reality constitutes itself as the subject of its own being used; s/he assumes it, and takes pleasure in it. Conversely, the one who is using the other knows that the self is being used for the other's own pleasure. In the reciprocal use of their bodies, the partners participate in a processual relationality that subjectifies by de-subjectifying. It is a 'creative enterprise', Foucault claimed, based on desexualization, that is a field of bodily pleasure and knowledge that exceeds life-giving sexual teleology¹⁵.

Despite his rationalizing attitude (he had also gained an M.A. in Geneva with a dissertation on Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*), Seabrook remained throughout his life fascinated by phenomena that were beyond scientific explanation. In collapsing the boundaries between the human, animal, and spirit worlds—in Haiti, Arabia, Africa, or transubstantiating them in BDSM-like sessions and scenes in Paris or New York—Seabrook did attempt to “unlock the door” to the Sacred (SEABROOK 1927: 283). The “door” swinging inward to one's psyche, or marking the threshold into mystical raving, or states of altered consciousness through prolonged practices of physical strain became a recurrent metaphor in Seabrook's writings. In 1934 he moved back to New York. Around 1938, under the impulse of Duke University Professor Joseph B. Rhine's research into parapsychology, Seabrook resumed the S/M-cum-trance-inducing practices with “enthusiastic volunteers” (SEABROOK 1942: 372), through as varied a set of techniques as the dervish dangling, Eskimo bondages with thongs, or having his partners sit still as human statues wearing the gimp mask for 36/48 hours. “She [one of Seabrook's new “Justines”] would be made to kneel on a bare floor for half a night or day until the pain became so intense she might have visions, as the great Saint Teresa of Avila had visions after a night of kneeling in a convent cell”, Worthington (2017: 252) remarked. Analogies with saints and

¹⁵ A similar perspective that extricates the concept of pleasure from the binary structure of a desiring (male) subject and a desired (female) object, and reconsiders it as a potency inherent in bodies regardless of procreative aims and social constructs of gender/power, inspires neo-materialist feminist approaches to BDSM. Delving on a philosophical tradition rooted in Baruch Spinoza's *Ethics* (who understood Nature as immanent interactions of bodies affected by intensifications or depletions of their *conatus*—that is the tendency of all things to persist in their own being, combine or disaggregate)—and expanded by Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's notions of ‘body without organs’ and *agencement de désir* (‘assemblage of desire’), Elizabeth Grosz reads the human body as desiring ‘intensive’ matter and a locus of experimental relationalities that undo power relations dictated by gender. See GROSZ 1995: 173-184.

religion became tropes in a lengthy account, published in the Surrealist journal *VVV* in March 1943, of an exceptional episode experienced by the writer and an anonymous person described as a ‘quaker girl’, in Rhinebeck in 1940. In this instance, “lust and terror”, and “mental-emotional excitation”, entangled with sexual arousal (“the deepest physiological urge of all”), opening up an unearthly “meaning beyond meaning”, as Seabrook put it (1943: 30 and 29). Seabrook illustrated his text with one of the pictures attributed to Man Ray or Boiffard of the naked woman wearing the balaclava and the steel collar (Fig. 13), this time characterized as “quaker girl in mask”; and with a close-up of “Seabrook in Africa” dozing against a sun-lit wall and shrouded in a burnous (the hooded cloak worn by Arabs).

The woman—we are told—had been searching for mystical enlightenment through stillness and meditation, and Seabrook instructed her in the dervish techniques of physical exertion in order to subdue the self. If we are to believe Seabrook’s words, the couple established a bond of reciprocal trust, both “safe from harm” (“You must help about this, you must be trusted to help about this”, she allegedly begged Seabrook). She would stand naked (or wrapped in the burnous) or kneel with her body upright for many hours during several days; Seabrook watched over her, witnessing her transitioning from a marble statue-like stillness to occasional convulsive trembling. This elicited in Seabrook the creepy feeling that he was facing a “living god”, a superhuman creature (“that Living and Terrible but Only Sanctuary”), which urged him to believe in a spiritual truth, and lay on the floor within an impromptu circle painted in gold and red, in instances of religious epiphany (SEABROOK 1943: 30). Seabrook thence described episodes of clairvoyance, retrocognition of the woman’s childhood memories, or of his own memories of Haitian voodoo sacrifices. The couple allegedly shared the feeling that they were both drifting in the same telepathic visions, passing through “the door” “as if hand in hand” (SEABROOK 1943: 30), or seeing through her eyes, in altered bodily sensations that lasted a fortnight. The photographs paring the masked quaker woman and Seabrook in the burnous (presumably similar to the one that she intermittently wore during the session) suggest the intersubjectivity achieved “after prolonged strain-stress, physical and mental”, despite the fact that the pictures were taken at different times and locations. They also visualize the blended sources operating in Seabrook’s equivocal personality: fetishism, a mixture of religious creeds, and ethnic artifacts.



QUAKER GIRL IN MASK



SEABROOK IN AFRICA

FIGURE 13. Man Ray (attributed) or Jacques-André Boiffard (attributed) or William Seabrook (?) *Quaker Girl in mask*; and Anonymous photographer, *Seabrook in Africa*, reproduced in William Seabrook, "The Door Swung Inward", *VVV*, no. 2-3 (1943): 33.

It is difficult to determine how much of Seabrook's account is truthful, exaggerated, self-indulgent playing the saint (as "the old St. Augustine when he thought he heard the voice of God in his back garden") or charlatanism. The episode may also be described as an instance of mutual "auto-induced hypnosis, in which active and passive roles were alternate", as Seabrook admitted (1943: 32 for St. Augustine; 31 for hypnosis). What is more, the point of view of his partner is undocumented. While the identities of the quaker woman or other female "research workers"—what Seabrook euphemistically called them—remain unknown, the pseudo-scientific side of their practices was public, and even aesthetically manicured in Man Ray's/Boiffard's photographs, or in a color photo-shoot by photographer Barrett Gallagher for *Click* magazine in 1942 (SEABROOK 1942: 372-373; "Can Science Guide Man's Mind into the Future?" 1942). This latter article cast Seabrook's sadomasochism as mere scientific work in the idyllic setting of his farmhouse studio in Rhinebeck, cluttered with tribal masks and trinkets from remote places, with the presence of a mysterious and elegantly dressed woman performing once more the dangling dervish, or sitting as an idol on an Egyptian throne (Fig. 14).



FIGURE 14. "Can Science Guide Man's Mind into the Future?", in *Click: The National Picture Monthly*, vol. 5, no. 11, November 1942: 26-27.

3. CONCLUSION

The pictorial corpus discussed above unfolds various facets of possible intersubjective relations within a S/M frame. The fullness of consent, the psychic intensity of the practices, and the pleasure derived, leave open the question of how much the ascent toward a glorious mutual enhancement succeeded, or achieved little more than Seabrook's self-gratification. Luris, although clad in oriental bangles, was neither a concubine nor a Koranic *hourī* but an emancipated woman, a willing participant in a quest for pleasure verging on mysticism; the same may be argued for the 'quaker' woman and later participants, although less documented and despite the trendy slant offered to the readership of a popular magazine. Lee Miller-cum-Seabrook merely mimicked the unfurling of the potential 'switch' of roles in the S/M script. Worthington's involvement arguably remained more superficial and ambivalent.

As a whole, the photographs portray aspects of an underground scene of personal experimentation, both in New York and in the Paris of the *années folles* and the 1930s. Seen in the context of the interwar period, the body of work shows the exploration of libidinal dimensions abhorrent to the family-oriented, moralistic, patriotic discourse voiced by public institutions, insofar as it was foreign to positivist sexology. The capability of those practices (such as the partner's erotic objectification, and transgressing biological sexuality) to undo the psychological reification and alienation inherent in an industrialized capitalist society—then expounded by Marxist theorists—remained arguably reserved for a small and privileged intellectual elite. However, seen in a longer historical perspective, we may acknowledge the resurgence of the same heuristics in the discourse of the current BDSM subculture.

As BDSM theorists and practitioners claim, masochist interactions provide a temporary and powerful escape from awareness of self as a socially structured identity, to temporally constricted awareness of self as a physical body, focusing on immediate sensations and on being a sexual object. This willing and pleasurable objectification is believed to subvert the occult commodification of society (LANGDRIGE and BAKER 2007: 91-92; 98-118). Practices involving pain entail a loss of language and the return to sounds anterior to speech (that is a child or animal stage) as well as temporary destruction of consciousness, as pain obliterates complex

thoughts and emotions. This, however, is empirically seen as conducive to higher consciousness. BDSM practices producing pain yield intense, nonverbal, bodily forms of interpersonal connection, and some spiritual transcendence. They enable breaking through sensory routine; they share something of the rites of passage and heighten selfhood, which is typical of the sacred dimension and still informs specific pursuits of ‘modern primitivism’ (VALE and JUNO 1989). S/M participant and therapist Dossie Easton, for instance, has established analogies between BDSM practices inducing prolonged pain and other religious experiences, despite obvious differences in means and ethnic contexts: “Pain as a path to spiritual journeying is familiar to us in flagellation and sun dance, and body stress-religious rituals in many cultures around the world” (EASTON 2007: 227). This bridging differences is not substantially different from the analogy that Seabrook and Luris felt with the dervish ritual. Within the BDSM landscape, then and now, extreme forms of interaction are seen as quests for a ‘radical ecstasy’, as well as journeys to one’s Shadow self (in Jungian terms), with cathartic or even therapeutic value (EASTON 2007). Pushed to their extremes, Luris’s and contemporary edge BDSM play confront us with ethically problematic limit-experiences whereby individual enlightenment not only turns into a mystical dissolution of the ego, but may also potentially veer into a pleasurable death¹⁶.

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¹⁶ DOWNING 2007: 129.

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