

## SPECTACULARLY WOUNDED

*White male vulnerability as  
heterosexual fantasy*

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In a 2012 interview, E. L. James, the author of the massively popular *Fifty Shades* novel series, describes its male protagonist Christian Grey as ‘the ultimate fantasy guy. And that’s the point: As long as you accept that fantasy guy – fantasy sex, fantasy lifestyle, a broken man who needs fixing through love – what woman could resist that?’ (in Thomas, 2012.) Grey is a twenty-seven-year-old, white, cis-gendered, Seattle-based multi-billionaire businessman CEO firmly representative of the one per cent. As the most privileged, he is nevertheless depicted as also being spectacularly broken and scarred by childhood trauma. Starting from and revolving around James’ articulation of a hurt, damaged man as an irresistible object of heterosexual desire, this chapter inquires after the intermeshing of privilege, vulnerability and desirability in the narrative fantasy of *Fifty Shades*.

Written as fan fiction online and launched as e-books in 2011–12, James’ trilogy gained viral popularity and was published through Vintage as *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2012a), *Fifty Shades Darker* (2012b) and *Fifty Shades Freed* (2012c). Despite the notably and unequivocally negative critical reception that the series continues to enjoy, it has been translated into more than forty languages and sold over 125 million copies worldwide (Deller et al., 2013; Grigoriadis, 2015). The trilogy has spawned a film trilogy as well as a literary spin-off trilogy – comprising *Grey* (2015), *Darker* (2017) and the forthcoming *Freed* – which recounts the narrative from Christian Grey’s perspective in order to shed further light on his inner life (see Flood, 2015).

The first volume introduces the main couple: Christian Grey and Anastasia Steele – a twenty-one-year-old English literature undergraduate student – the blossoming of their mutual passion, her introduction to sexual pleasure and his kinky tendencies, and the childhood traumas and

desire for control that haunt the couple's newly acquired bliss. At the end of the first book Anastasia leaves, only for the couple to be reunited in the beginning of the next one. Following the classic romance narrative formula of 'boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl', the two remaining books focus on the couple's growth haunted by past shadows, threats of external intervention and violence. These events intersect with Christian's initiation to loving care and gradual recovery from trauma, as well as the couple's passage into monogamous matrimony and parenthood (Pääkkölä, 2016: 14). Despite thinking of his heart as having been 'savaged beyond recognition a long time ago' (James, 2015: 10), romance makes it possible for Christian to reveal his inner softness and uproot early experiences of hunger, violence, hurt, death, abandonment and neglect in ways enabling therapeutic healing.

This chapter asks what makes the traumatised and vulnerable super-rich white man appealing as a heterosexual fantasy figure. In order to unravel vulnerability as both a fantasy that lends the series much of its commercial power and a narrative instrument deployed in character building, I first examine the use of generic romance and erotica conventions (e.g. Radway, 1984; Snitow, 1983) as well as the gendered forms of affective labour that the figure of the broken, rich, sad white man entails, motivates and fuels. Second, and in connection with Eva Illouz's (2014) analysis of *Fifty Shades* as self-help, I inquire after the interconnections of trauma and sexual fantasy within the novels' broad appeal. Third, bringing these strands of discussion together, I ask how male vulnerability of the spectacular kind works in relation to social and economic privilege, the dynamics of BDSM and gendered relations of power – namely, how the narrative centrality of a privileged yet broken white man attunes the imagery of material opulence, limitless wealth, kink play and heterosexual fulfilment in a markedly depoliticised vein. Vulnerability, as examined in this chapter, is primarily a narrative instrument crucial to the dynamics of romance as a story of growth, transformation and intimacy.

## ROMANCE REMIXED

Christian's hidden vulnerability and brokenness are presented as key components to the overall fantasy scenario, and it is Anastasia's task to rescue and fix him through romantic love. According to the generic romance formula that is dutifully followed here, the virginal, younger heroine is the one with the special capacity to soften, tame and heal the romantic hero whose hard shell hides his insecurities and fragilities (Snitow, 1983: 249). The heroine's capacity to do this renders her exceptional and forms a specific, exclusive bond between the couple. As Janice Radway (1984: 128–9) points

out in her classic analysis of popular romance novels and their avid readers, heroines need to be able to ‘translate male reticence and cruelty into tenderness and devotion’ by bringing ‘to the surface traits and propensities that are part of the hero’s most basic nature.’ Faithfully conforming to this script, Anastasia – ‘good and innocent and courageous’ (James, 2015: 511) – is able to rescue Christian from his nightmares of childhood abuse. Meanwhile,

The hero of the romantic fantasy is always characterized by spectacular masculinity. Indeed, it is insufficient for the author to remark in passing that the romantic hero has a muscular physique. The reader must be told, instead, that every aspect of his being, whether his body, his face, or his general demeanor, is informed by the purity of his maleness. Almost everything about him is hard, angular, and dark. It is, however, essential to add the qualifying ‘almost’ here because, in descriptions of the ideal romantic hero, the terrorizing effect of his exemplary masculinity is always tempered by the presence of a small feature that introduces an important element of softness into the overall picture. (Radway, 1984: 128)

First coined as *Twilight* fan fiction on an online forum, *Fifty Shades* is essentially a sexed-up variation of romantic genre fiction that borrows from familiar tropes, scenes and characters. In *Twilight*, the dark hero is literally a vampire – a pale immortal teenager – whose passion, should it be unleashed, would be the romantic heroine’s undoing. In *Fifty Shades*, the hero is a white elite businessman described as an ‘elegant, beautiful, Greek god’ (James, 2012b: 183) with ‘unruly dark copper colored hair and intense, bright gray eyes’ (James, 2012a: 7). Thus his darkness – central to the romantic hero – is not lodged in physical features inasmuch as in the heavy shadows of trauma, deep dark secrets and sexual tastes ringing with risk (Harrison and Holm, 2013). An avid athlete, Christian is sketched out as a physical joy to behold, and Anastasia is frequently lost in visual contemplation of his overpowering, magnetic good looks: ‘My mouth goes dry as he casually strolls around the piano toward me. He has broad shoulders, narrow hips, and his abdominal muscles ripple as he walks’ (James, 2012a: 112). In a fully Gothic vein, Christian, filled with self-doubt and self-hate, nevertheless thinks of himself as nothing short of a monster with a ‘dark, twisted,’ ‘ugly, torn’ soul, and can only feel relieved for Anastasia not to know the depths of his depravity that lurks beneath the handsome surface (James, 2015: 43, 501, 504–5, 545).

The romantic couple’s relationship is rife with traumas and frictions, yet these rarely extend to their scenes of sexual play. In fact, frictions and tensions of all kinds are lubricated with and overcome through abundant, mutual and easily available sexual pleasure. Their relationship is initially designed as a contractual one under Christian’s scripting, but unfolds as

a highly compatible, intense and mutually gratifying one. Despite his inner darkness and nightly regressions into traumatised infancy, Christian remains in control as endlessly skilled and knowledgeable about carnal pleasures. As the resident sexual expert, he knows Anastasia's body and desire much better than she does, and guides her through experimentations of all kinds. In fact, as Meg-John Barker (2013: 898) notes, 'Anastasia rarely communicates any desires of her own but rather Christian orchestrates their scenes completely'. Consent is therefore 'inevitably complicated under such conditions wherein one person does not know their desires and is restricted from articulating some possibilities, whilst the other automatically knows what they both want' (Barker, 2013: 890). Scenes of sexual play do not, for the most part, involve much activity from Anastasia. It is Christian who sets the scene and coins and explains the rules, which may or may not be negotiable. He does so according to his own preference while also mastering the secrets of Anastasia's pleasure, which, consequently, turn out to be not secret at all.

There is no room in their scenes of sexual submission and domination for the reversal of or play with roles. Consequently, scenes of female submission and male domination are mapped onto a gendered dynamic of unequal social status and agency, where Christian's desire for control extends beyond the 'red room of pain' to the details of Anastasia's diet, exercise, birth control and social life. His tendencies for stalking and jealousy are depicted as ultimately in her best interest, while possessiveness and jealousy translate as love and commitment. In this sense, the books explicitly prop up the gendered hierarchies of control and privilege that frame and structure the couple's relationship, and find support from the broader social dynamics of privilege. These dynamics come wrapped up in a fantasy scenario of youth, white physical beauty and abundant wealth, manifesting in lavish apartments, private planes, helicopters, yachts, new cars, expensive jewellery, designer fashions, fine dining and exclusive holidays. The fantasy on offer is unburdened by scarcity or need other than that of the emotional and physical kind, the gradual yet constant fulfilment of which comprises the main narrative tension.

### KINK IN THE ROMANCE PATTERN

The ingredient of BDSM initially marked *Fifty Shades* apart from other competing romantic erotica titles and afforded it with a specific edge. The series is naughty, yet its transgressions occur safely within the confines of heterosexual romance, commitment and passion (Dymock, 2013). Like Ann Summers parties promoting sex toys and other paraphernalia to women,

the novels chart out the boundaries of ‘the acceptably kinky’ within the marshes of the ‘plain perverted’, while foregrounding female pleasure throughout (Storr, 2003: 208–11). In fact, it is the separation between the acceptably and the unacceptably kinky that guides the narrative as a negotiation between the partners’ different preferences, expectations and boundaries of comfort. While Christian’s BDSM preferences are motivated as trauma play allowing for a sense of control that he so craves, for Anastasia this remains both a fascinating and uneasy testing ground for what her body may or may not like, and what practices of pleasure the world may generally hold. As their relationship develops, Christian removes the paraphernalia undesired by Anastasia from his playroom, and the couple constantly negotiate what toys or scenes to experiment with. In the course of this all, the playroom shifts from being the centre of Christian’s sexual routines to an additional spice. Meanwhile, their more-or-less kinky patterns of play leak into the other rooms of his vast penthouse, hotels, elevators, boats and private planes.

In accordance with the conventions of romance (Snitow, 1983: 247), Anastasia’s perspective is emphasised in the first three books through the uses of the first-person point of view and the description of sensory intensities that it affords. The echoes of transgression connected to Christian’s kinky bent and Anastasia’s curiosity about her bodily capacities, combined with the couple’s insatiable lust for one another, revolve in the registers of excess characteristic of pornographic fiction. The flood of sexual desire comes across as a visceral force that fills their lives with enchantment, liveliness and meaning: ‘I am just sensation. This is what he does to me – takes my body and possesses it wholly so that I think of nothing but him. His magic is powerful, intoxicating. I’m a butterfly caught in his net, unable and unwilling to escape. I’m his ... totally his’ (James, 2012b: 79).

As Ruth Deller and Clarissa Smith (2013: 937) point out, the fact that the *Fifty Shades* series is, with the exception of *Grey*, ‘Written by a woman, from a woman’s point of view and for a female audience’, the books have been ‘discursively fabricated as potentially revelatory so that to read them was to engage in public debate about female sexuality’. As a media phenomenon, the series is tightly entangled with the notion of women’s culture as an iconic piece of ‘mummy porn’ that has been often defined as a compendium of E. L. James’s own sexual fantasies (e.g. Dymock, 2013: 883). Here, Christian – ‘a broken man who needs fixing through love’ – stands for the penultimate heterosexual fantasy figure who, despite his shell of privilege, remains but a fragile husk of a man.

Despite Christian’s extraordinarily exclusive lifestyle that the novels so attentively detail, the quotidian reverberation of ‘raising the ordinary to the extraordinary’ (James, 2015: 16) cuts through the books, from the couple’s first

encounter when Anastasia makes the remark about an artwork in his office, to scenes where her orgasms unfold similarly to the spin cycles of a washing machine, and where the act of cooking a chicken fry-up transforms into an intensely sexual scene. Romantic and sexual desire elevates Christian's sombre moods from 'flat and gray as the weather' into ones of heightened aliveness, and shifts his monotonous and monochrome world 'into one rich with color' (James, 2015: 4, 518). His world rotates 'on a different axis' as Anastasia brings his heart back to life (James, 2017: 127, 231). For her part, Anastasia has 'never felt so alive, so vital' (James, 2012b: 359, 375). According to the generic defaults of romance fiction, 'The body of the heroine is alive and singing in every fiber, she is overrun by sexuality that wells up inside her and that she cannot control' (Snitow, 1983: 254). This all results from the immediate attraction between the couple that galvanises their bodies and makes them flourish.

Ann Snitow (1983: 256) associates the sex-saturated liveliness of romance fiction with the generic features of pornography that explore 'the explosion of the boundaries of the self and where social constraints are overwhelmed by a flood of sexual energy'. For Snitow, romance fiction differs from pornography mainly in how it negotiates, or balances, the visceral force of sex with romantic magnetism and the goal of domestic security (Snitow, 1983: 259; also Smith, 2007: 201). This magnetism and security ultimately make it possible for Christian to have his body touched and change his routines of sexual play from the singularly kinky towards vanilla. As love making, sex becomes an arena for the production of intimacy and trust.

In contrast to the plenitude of bodies and desires, abundant satiation and 'enjoyment in sensuous material reality' that, according to Steven Marcus (1964, 22), form the basis of the pornographic narrative realm, *Fifty Shades* narrows down the availability of sexual partners to just one person while tying desire to monogamous commitment. At the same time, a plenitude of enjoyment is taken in access to exclusive goods. The frame of propriety is highlighted and eroticised throughout the main couple's relationship where repetitive declarations of ownership fuel desire for both parties involved: "You are mine," he whispers. "Only mine. Don't forget it." His voice is intoxicating, his words heady, seductive. I feel his growing erection against my thigh' (James, 2012a: 119). In the state of matrimony, the wedding ring, as a symbol of possession, becomes something of an arousing fetish object in its own right: 'I reach for his left hand and plant a kiss on his wedding ring, a plain platinum band matching my own. "Mine," I whisper' (James, 2012c: 119). 'His wedding ring clinks against the glass as he takes another sip of wine. Now that is a sexy sound' (James, 2012c: 240). In these instances, sexual desire, ownership and romantic love are glued into a fantasy scene of proprietary and monogamous bliss.

The core story of *Fifty Shades* is one of overwhelming, possessive heterosexual desire set in the surroundings of exclusive white privilege. With the exception of Claude, Christian's black, kickboxing champion trainer, José, Anastasia's photographer friend who sometimes fails to respect her boundaries of bodily integrity, and José's father, the gallery of characters is firmly white. Within the novels' heterosexual realm, there are no other directions for fantasies and attachments to ripple. During the first encounter, Anastasia, interviewing Christian on her best friend Kate's behalf, asks if he is gay. In *Grey's* first-person narration, this misrecognition makes it possible to more clearly outline his sexual palates: 'How dare she! I have a sudden urge to drag her out of her seat, bend her over my knee, spank her, and then fuck her over my desk with her hands tied behind her back. That would answer her ridiculous question' (James, 2015: 12). References to this fundamental misunderstanding of Christian's celibate public image re-emerge as jokes, given his evident, steadfast heterosexuality: 'I wrap my arms around him, marveling at the ridiculousness of Christian being gay' (James, 2012c: 280).

Heterosexual coupling abounds in the series more widely: in addition to Anastasia and Christian marrying, Kate marries Christian's brother Elliot while their sister Mia pairs up with Kate's brother Ethan. This somewhat claustrophobic, quasi-incestuous pattern of coupling keeps things firmly in the family while allowing for undisturbed sociability within the couple format. Meanwhile, queer people appear as liberal accents at the margins of the story as gay male hairdressers and massage therapists, as well as Ros Bailey, the lesbian Vice President of Grey Enterprises Holdings, Inc. Intimacy in *Fifty Shades* is framed as both heterosexual and familial. In the broader narrative arc, the Grey family both grows with new daughters and brothers in law and becomes increasingly whole as Christian opens to being physically touched and emotionally expressive.

## TRAUMA AND EMOTIONAL LABOUR

Christian's journey of self-discovery and healing, as narrated by James, closely follows a popular Freudian route where sexual preferences and behaviours are rooted in childhood events, relationships and traumas. In other words, Freudian trauma functions here as a narrative template that runs parallel to and supports the genre conventions of romance and erotica. Christian dominates young brown-haired women, having witnessed the abuse and death of his young and brown-haired drug addict mother by her pimp, who hit, kicked and burnt him with cigarettes. The stuff of trauma emerges as a key explanation for both Christian's BDSM interest and

discomfort with physical intimacy in ways that position his kink preference as an outcome of harm, and therefore a problem to be solved.

Anastasia, who becomes the only woman allowed to touch the scars on Christian's muscular, sculpted torso, finds herself thinking of them as a 'stark physical embodiment of a horrific childhood and a sickening reminder of what mental scars he must bear' (James, 2012b: 125). Figuring out the routes of trauma, she soon charts their connections with 'his control freakery, his possessiveness, his jealousy, his overprotectiveness ... I can even understand why he doesn't like to be touched – I've seen the physical scars. I can only imagine the mental ones, and I've only glimpsed his nightmares once' (James, 2012b: 422). This specific product of 'mummy porn' then positions the female protagonist as an emotional caretaker for whom nursing the broken rich white man through trauma is a labour of love. Initially, Anastasia's life starts to revolve around the mystery of Christian's trauma. Once the roots of trauma are uncovered, the emotional labour needed for working through it becomes her central mission. In other words, the gendered demands of affective labour – of reproductive care, emotional support, as well as positive affective amplification (Hochschild, 2003) – become the elementary stuff of romance. Framed as a female heterosexual fantasy, the task and requirement of emotional labour positions Christian, a figure of privilege condensed, as a 'lost boy' acutely dependent on feminine acceptance and care.

Childhood trauma – recounted in several flashback snippets of nightmare – explains Christian's compulsion to control and punish Anastasia, as well as keep her safe. These aspects then fold into BDSM play as a form of DIY therapy (James, 2015: 425). In his recurrent nightmares, Christian regresses into childhood, observing his frightening surroundings from the perspective of an infant, and with the emotional registers of one.

It is dark now, and my mommy is gone. I can reach the light when I stand on the stool.

On. Off. On. Off. On. Off.

Light. Dark. Light. Dark. Light.

I'm hungry. I eat the cheese. There is cheese in the fridge. Cheese with blue fur.

When is Mommy coming home?

Sometimes she comes home with him. I hate him. I hide when he comes. My favorite place is in my mommy's closet. It smells of Mommy. It smells of Mommy when she's happy. When is Mommy coming home?

My bed is cold. And I am hungry. I have my blankie and my cars but not my mommy. When is Mommy coming home? (James, 2015: 216)

Unlike the sad blue-collar men of contemporary American film that Jack Halberstam (2017) identifies as being sad due to low pay, the uncaring

women around them and the broader, oppressive conditions of contemporary life, Christian is sad in a cocoon of wealth with a very caring and attentive woman indeed. There is little to the trimmings and resources of his life that calls for audience empathy or pity. Yet, similarly to the cinematic depiction that Halberstam explores, audience empathy is requested, or even demanded, for the figure of the sad white man on whose hurt narrative attention clusters. Childhood trauma provides an origin story that circumvents Christian's uber-privileged circumstances by revealing the deeper, persistent current of damage and vulnerability at his core that he so tries to hide. In other words, vulnerability amounts to an inner truth concerning Christian's character.

Christian lives haunted by an engulfing darkness, frightened by feelings of love and affection. Becoming animated by romantic love means becoming subject to the potential of further emotional harm, which makes love terrifying as such: 'That strange feeling swells in my chest. Scarier than the darkness, Bigger. More potent. It has the power to wound' (James, 2017: 206). 'I'm a lost boy, standing before you. Unloved. Abandoned by the one person who was supposed to protect me, because I'm a monster' (James, 2017: 218).

Since this partly infantilised, privileged sad white man is also the 'ultimate fantasy guy', trauma is central to the fantasy that the series caters for. Within this narrative realm, Christian's vulnerability makes it possible to communicate interiority and personal depth, as well as chart his passage of growth. White male vulnerability creates an acute demand for the female heroine and her emotional labours while also investing them with immeasurable value – for, as James repeatedly points out, Anastasia is doing nothing less than saving him. The versatile emotional labour that fixing the wounded, tormented man requires spans from maternal care to romantic intimacy and sexual athleticism. In a pattern more than subtly suggestive of Freudian patterns of trauma, the transformations afforded by romance shift Christian's painful dreams to happy ones where the smell of the lost mother blends into the sweet scent of his new girlfriend and bride-to-be:

Mommy sits looking at me in the mirror with the big crack.  
I brush her hair. It's soft and smells of Mommy and flowers ...  
And she turns around and smiles at me.  
Today, she's happy.  
I like it when Mommy is happy.  
I like it when she smiles at me.  
She looks pretty when she smiles.  
*Let's bake a pie, Maggot.*  
Apple pie.

I like when Mommy bakes.

I wake suddenly with a sweet scent invading my mind. It's Ana. (James, 2015: 320–1)

The Freudian model of sexual desire is rooted in primary trauma as the child comes to realise their separateness from 'the caretaking environment/mother/breast that she relies on for nurturance and pleasure' (Berlant, 2012: 27). The mother's body, and the lost breast in particular, is the object of both desire and trauma. In this narrative of loss, lack and melancholy, 'to love an object is to attempt to master it, to seek to destroy its alterity or Otherness' (Berlant, 2012: 25). Love is not antithetical to aggressiveness if sadism and masochism are seen as integral to human attachment. Meanwhile, 'Love enables the pressure of desire's aggression to be discharged within a frame of propriety' (Berlant, 2012: 25). All this finds an incarnation in the damaged, needy Christian haunted by memories of his mother, practising structured BDSM routines as a means of self-therapy and moving into the security of proprietary monogamy in the course of romance.

### FANTASY BEYOND TRAUMA

In her analysis of the series, Illouz identifies it as a genre hybrid combining Gothic romance with self-help. For Illouz (2014: 30), it primarily offers a social fantasy rather than a sexual one, providing guidelines for navigating the tensions of heterosexual gender relations in late capitalist culture. Understood in this vein, the remarkable success of *Fifty Shades*, like that of other bestsellers, is indicative of its providing solutions to social tensions and guidelines towards a happier life – a point made earlier by both Radway and Snitow, who see Harlequin narratives as negotiating and possibly compensating for the discrepancies and unresolvable tensions of heterosexual relationships. In addition to improving sexual lives with the aid of practical tips, *Fifty Shades*, according to Illouz, also promises to pave the way to happier relationships and self-discovery.

Illouz deploys the term 'resonance' to describe how books that become bestsellers encapsulate something of that which Raymond Williams (1977: 133–4) identified as structures of feeling, namely common yet partly emergent and hence possibly ephemeral qualities and experiences of life characteristic for specific generations, contexts or locations. For Illouz, it is that which resonates among readers, striking a chord in its familiarity but also formulating something that they have not quite found the means to express: '*Resonate* here means that a narrative is able not only to address a social experience that is not adequately understood, named, or categorized

but also to “frame” it in adequately explanatory ways’ (Illouz, 2014: 23, emphasis in the original). Illouz’s analysis focuses on the social experiences of heterosexuality in late capitalist cultures without extending to those connected to race or class. Anastasia’s upward mobility from modest means to extravagant riches, as facilitated by romantic coupling, is smoothed over by her whiteness: while she may not always feel like belonging to her novel settings, in the eyes of those around her the fit is nothing short of perfect. The social experiences that the series frames and that possibly find resonance in its readers are impossible to decouple from the tiers of social privilege connected to and afforded by whiteness.

Since Illouz sees *Fifty Shades* primarily as a social fantasy speaking to women in relationships, she does not frame it as pornographic stimulation as such. There is nevertheless no need to see these two modes of reading – of advice and of sexual arousal – as mutually exclusive. In the case of *Fifty Shades*, such a division in fact turns attention away from the centrality of sexual fantasy as its key content and attraction. The novels’ success among readers can be connected to the pleasurable circulation of sexual fantasies that intensify and animate bodies. Such circulation cannot be neatly reduced to functionality or instrumentality of the kind implied by the explanatory framework of self-help.

In his discussion of sexual fantasies, Martin Barker (2014: 145) maintains a critical distance from Freudian and post-Freudian psychoanalytical theories that treat fantasies as compensatory ‘playback for real traumatic experiences’ and the ‘distorted management of childhood problems and traumas, almost always family generated’, such as those driving Christian Grey. Instead, Barker is interested in the diverse work that sexual fantasies do in peoples’ lives as a means of trying ‘out versions of self-in-sexual-society, reimagining themselves through others’ reimaginings’ (2014: 146). He offers a five-fold conceptualisation of sexual fantasy as ‘a conscious accentuation of desire’; ‘a means to look at our responses to things’; ‘a world of possibilities to be explored and thought about’; ‘a visitation to a distant realm of desires and fantasies’ and an imagining of ‘what I might or might not be’ (2014: 155). Understood in this vein, fantasies contribute to the creation of novel connections, the imagining of scenarios, the build-up of desire and the emergence of bodily pleasure. Rather than being rooted in trauma, sexual fantasy is reframed as the productive exploration of bodily horizons of possibility. *Fifty Shades* is both a sexual and a social fantasy for the reason that it is not possible to separate the two – that is, to somehow ply the sexual apart from the social. It then follows that vulnerability, as it cuts through the fabric of romance, is connected to negotiations of dependency, trust and need within intimate relationships – as Illouz suggests – as well as the discovery of bodily liveness and enchantment that sexual play affords in the framework of romance. Despite the

centrality of trauma to Christian's orientation in the world, Anastasia's sexual discovery is a narrative of pleasure, even ecstasy. The first volume in particular – the most successful in the entire series – frames female sexuality as a realm of possibility and adventure, rather than one of healing or trauma.

E. L. James herself describes how, in the feedback she receives, women write of having discovered previously unknown aspects of themselves: "They're quite freaked out by it, but in a good way. They're thinking, "Wow, this is amazing. Why has it taken me so long to discover this?" (in Thomas, 2012). Such discovery can be understood through any of Barker's five conceptualisations of the productivity of sexual fantasies, but much less through the template of trauma. Writing on masochistic erotica, Smith (2009: 29) argues that its readers engage 'in an empathetic relation with the narration – this is how sex can feel, how it works on the body. It is a relation of co-animation'. The pleasures of *Fifty Shades* can therefore be associated with 'corporeal intensification which requires going beyond the limits of "ordinary, nice, well-behaved sex"; submitting to feeling, letting go; letting oneself experience sexual desire' (Smith, 2009: 30).

Such zones of intensity engendered in acts of reading are resonant points of contact between personal sexual fantasies, and those rendered public through their publication and circulation. These then push and open up the perceived horizons of bodily possibility as that which readers can imagine doing, experimenting with or enjoying. Conceptualised in this vein, rather than in connection with social tensions and experiences à la Illouz, resonance describes instances of being moved, touched and affected by that which is tuned to the right frequency. Such attunement emerges as certain bodies, images, texts or figures of fantasy attract attention, fascinate and possibly stick. Resonance is descriptive of the momentary connection between bodies that varies in intensity and shape over time (Paasonen, 2011: 16–18; 2013). The resonance of *Fifty Shades* can be seen as coming from not only its power to address the complexities of heterosexual coupling but also its force to capture attention through the embodied reverbs that its narrative of sex and romance sparks. Written in the first-person point of view, the books describe in minute detail what is happening to the narrator's body and how all this feels. As is the case with pornography, these accounts of physical intensity, of bodies moving and being moved, aim to move the bodies of those reading within resonant moments.

## PLEASURES OF PRIVILEGE

*Fifty Shades* is a story about personal fulfilment through sexual learning and intimacy. The positioning of the sad, white, damaged man in need

of saving as an ultimate heterosexual fantasy figure attunes the available circuits of desire in particular ways. Christian's brokenness, trauma and vulnerability, narrated in accordance with a popular Freudian template, serve a key narrative function as a means of balancing the unequal relations of power between the main couple. It is Anastasia, and no other, who has the unique ability to heal Christian through emotional labour and sexual experimentation. In the course of all this, the books adopt and appropriate the language of vulnerability in ways that detach it from considerations of racialised, class-related and gendered structures of privilege and subordination. Rather, James frames vulnerability as a personal property emerging from tragic, under-privileged circumstances of hunger and neglect. Connected to trauma, it becomes exclusively an inner, individual condition detached from the current material conditions of Christian's life. This vulnerability then works to humanise his character as a representative of the global business elite as well as motivate romance as techniques of healing as his primary focus and priority.

Christian's wealth is initially presented as something of a dilemma for the romantic heroine to solve in ways assuring that Anastasia is no gold-digger, yet its comforts soon overpower her hesitancy. Despite the abundant pleasures that the purchase of services, objects and other commodities afford, the cocoon of wealth does not suffice to keep out the harms and risks of the surrounding world. Christian employs therapists, a private security and private investigators, buys the safest of high-end German cars and dwells within the isolation of his luxury penthouse, yet none of this is enough to keep his inner turmoil at bay, or keep other people from infringing on his privacy in violent ways. Both inner and outer security then come across as elusive but valuable, while the lack of the former in particular tints Christian's life in unhappy shades. In contrast, romantic love provides therapeutic healing and emotional security of the kind that money cannot buy.

As is not particularly rare or surprising in erotica and romance, *Fifty Shades* veers away from addressing structural inequalities that give rise to the forms of privilege that it so carefully conveys. Rather, the series reinforces them through the perennial white saviour fantasy where Africa becomes a space for a white person to 'become a godlike savior or, at the very least, have his or her emotional needs satisfied' (Cole, 2012). Due to his childhood experiences, Christian is committed to fighting hunger in Africa by developing innovative agricultural techniques and renewable energy sources, and directly shipping food to the needy. His philanthropy is motivated by experiences of personal suffering that translate as and call for degrees of empathy. None of this is connected to the global structures of privilege and exploitation, or to the circulation of materials, goods and resources within which Christian's enterprises deal. Avoiding publicity

for his charitable actions, Christian operates under no external pressure, encouragement or need; hence, the project of fighting world hunger is reimagined and refocused as being about the emotional drama of a rich white man. The activities of a white saviour soften Christian's character and provide it with some degree of depth and roundness. While the generosity of a super-rich American man towards the less fortunate functions as proof of his inner goodness and genuineness, the people to whom this help is targeted remain nowhere present or named as individuals speaking for themselves. Since the white saviour fantasy is both of and about white people, and their agency and emotional life (Cole, 2012), the less privileged and the starving function as narrative props in and ephemeral background for the construction of Christian Grey as the ultimate fantasy guy.

Written by James, a British author, the series caters for fantasies of American wealth and luxury decoupled from politics of race or issues of social justice. Given the books' massive global appeal, this fantasy resonates well beyond the United Kingdom or the United States. The setting of white wealth would then seem to involve a certain invisibility as a transnational fantasy template that translates easily from one language and social context to another. Zooming in on the inner vulnerabilities and emotional authenticity of Christian Grey makes it possible to efface some of his privilege, even when it is constantly being highlighted. White, straight, male privilege and vulnerability are therefore not mere trimmings to the overall fantasy catered for but central to its dynamic. The striking edge of privilege is rounded up by trauma and romance, which both soften the male hero and elevate the heroine to his equal as an exceptional and irreplaceable love object and emotional labourer.

Christian's position as the fantasy guy revolves around his divine looks, success, clout, sexual skill and inner softness. Critics have, however, regularly identified his character as 'an utter psychopath', 'a cut-price Mr Darcy in nipple clamps', 'a million different shades of sexist' and 'a deeply unpleasant, insecure asshole', whom readers are nevertheless called on to pity (Biederharn, 2015). As is obvious on the basis of the extended critiques squared against *Fifty Shades*, there is no universal resonance to this romantic hero or the ways in which James sketches out his inner life. At the same time, the stuff that the guy is made of – including the formulas of romantic fiction, the fleshy intensities of BDSM erotica, the shivers of Freudian sexual trauma, obsessive and possessive monogamous desire, extraordinary richness and white straight male privilege – boils down into a heady mixture with global market value and appeal. This stuff frames and orients the scenes of bodily transgression and sexual ecstasy, while also enclosing them in predictable patterns, hierarchies and dynamics.

In the midst of this all, vulnerability has particular value as a narrative tool that grants Christian interiority, and provides Anastasia with the challenge and labour of saving him from the lingering shadows of trauma, in doing so providing a solution to the couple's unequal positions of wealth, privilege and power. At the same time, the value of white male vulnerability remains dependent on the depths of Christian's trauma being sealed up, his sweaty nightmares evaporating and his more hardcore kink preferences being abandoned for matrimonial vanilla. The main story, or fantasy, of *Fifty Shades* revolves around the transformations afforded by romance and sexual discovery wrapped up in a proprietary couple format. This narrative of transformation is set in a fantasy frame of white American super-richness where the issues causing suffering and vulnerability are personal rather than societal, and solvable through the freely given affective labour of loved ones. The attraction of the novels' fantasy is directly dependent on the imagined subject in question – Christian Grey – being worth the care, love and attention that is so richly endowed on him. As a subject and fantasy figure, the super-rich, white, straight cis-man described as a Greek god incarnate then comes across as valuable indeed.

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