

## “Cycling, Sadomasochism, and the Sublime”

### *Abstract*

“Cycling, Sadomasochism, and the Sublime” engages with a form of experimental scholarship based on intuition, affect, friendship, and corporeal epistemology.

The story begins 35,000 feet in the air between Palo Alto and Ottawa, where we -- Philip and Ummni -- were flying back home after participating at the 2017 Law, Culture & Humanities conference. We got to talking, as one does, but it was different from the usual chit-chat. Maybe it was because of the liminal space we were traversing, between national borders and atmospheric layers, but we felt liberated from the standard front-stage performance of colleague interaction. We spoke honestly about things that really mattered to us. Among the many topics we covered, two stood out: cycling for Philip; and sexuality (specifically SM sexuality) for Ummni. What struck us were the fascinating points of overlap, along with the uncanny ways we empathized with the other’s experience. Even though the specifics of the phenomena were unfamiliar -- Ummni knows nothing about competitive cycling, Philip nothing much about kink -- as we described to each other the thing that really matters to us, there was recognition, lots of head nodding and exclamations of “yes, exactly!” This, in and of itself, is special. But also, we were getting at something quite taboo: feelings of *authenticity* and experiences of the *sublime*. In our academic world -- critical legal studies, intersectional feminism, and especially postmodern and poststructuralist theory -- words like “authenticity” and the “sublime” are to be sniggered at, acceptable only when used to critique their use by another. Allegedly sentimental and essentialist, such concepts, it is maintained, fly in the face of what we know about how ideology and power shape perception. Nonetheless, in this paper, we are going to fly in the face of such critique.

The first part of the presentation will draw on Philip’s personal experience of road cycling training and competition, a diverse corpus of cultural materials addressing competitive cycling, as well as Federico García Lorca’s essay, “Play and Theory of the *Duende*,” to explore cycling as a route to the sublime and self-liberation. Traditional Marxist sociology has considered sport a mere distraction from our alienated existence under capitalism. Philip suggests that such an assessment fails to capture the potential of the practice of competitive cycling to function as a means of accessing an alternative state of being that is incommensurable with the logic and norms of capitalist social relations. In particular, he will argue that the discipline of competitive cycling rejects the Cartesian mind-body split, requires its subjects to commit to a form of transhumanism, and demands an intense physical suffering that may fleetingly allow an experience of the sublime.

In the second part of the presentation, Ummni draws on personal experience, and a diverse array of critical and cultural texts that engage with kink, to explore SM as a route to the sublime, and as a space of liberation from the constraints of subjectivity. Lorca’s essay on the *Duende* will be given special attention, not because Ummni immediately grasps its relevance to her context, but rather because of an interest in entering into Philip’s perspective on the sublime. Traditional feminist theory has considered SM as symptomatic of patriarchal indoctrination, at best a victim’s self-effacing attempt to reconcile herself to her own subjugation. More recent anthropological critiques have cast SM as a neoliberal playground that, instead of being subversive, simply reproduces social hierarchies, consumerism and the biopolitical disciplinary dimensions of late capitalism. Without denying its cultural embeddedness, I suggest that such critiques fail to recognize the phenomenology of SM. I will argue that through its very mimicry of inequality, SM reveals the malleability of all social markers. And through its practices of role playing, power-exchange and suffering, Ummni will explore its power to create authentic states of being, and intersubjective relations.