

# Attached to Happiness with a Chain:

## On Slavery and BDSM in the work of Samuel Delany

The utopias and dystopias in the worlds of Samuel R. Delany can open our eyes to wacky and wild possibilities that challenge popular radical ideas about what a human life could look like. We will examine the origins, manifestations, and movement through the various types of modern slavery. We will use the work of Lewis Call (a noted critic of Delany) to examine the role of BDSM in subverting mechanisms of slavery, perversion as an attack on morality, and how we can change our relationships to our bodies.

*You know what I do? I listen to other people, stumbling about with their half thoughts and half sentences and their clumsy feelings that they can't express, and it hurts me. So I go home and burnish it and polish it and weld it to a rhythmic frame, make the dull colors gleam, mute the garish artificiality to pastels, so it doesn't hurt any more: that's my poem. I know what they want to say, and I say it for them.*  
Babel-17

*It's a beautiful universe... wondrous and the more exciting because no one has written plays and poems and built sculptures to indicate the structure of desire I negotiate every day as I move about in it.*  
Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand

Most pieces of challenging and interesting writing force readers into a battle with their own desires and beliefs. Sam Delany is a writer who has consistently done this for me. We live in a world where our desires are supposedly readily available everywhere. We can buy whatever we want, we can watch anything on a myriad of different screens, we can travel across the planet on boats and trains and cars, but are our own desires manifested? Do we have ability in this slave society to find and explore our own desires? Society assuredly attempts to, at the very least, funnel our desires in ways that perpetuate itself, as can be true of emotional catharsis experienced at death metal shows and at professional sports games.

How can we take our desires back? How can we

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the desires forced upon us from the spaces where things like freedom and choice might be possible? How can we change our relationships to ourselves and each other? Because these two relationships are not completely imprisoned yet, we may still have the ability to change them. Delany might answer by saying that by exploring and acting upon our desires we can change our relationships to ourselves and the world around us. Much of Delany's writing confronts slavery directly, and not moralistically, by showing how horrible it is (which I believe most humans can agree on). In one example, he writes about a love affair between two former slaves who travel around the world freeing other slaves, and about how their love is dependent upon the iron collar of slavery. These two former slaves are engaged in a BDSM play-slavery relationship, and Delany shows their relationships to the material slavery of the world and as Delany writes, the "machinery of their desire." By playing with the concept of slavery he forces readers to confront their own relationship with the slave society we live in, and perhaps opens them up to changing that relationship.

Delany's writing destroys identity and explores desire. Much of this is anathema to the general public. Delany wrote a book named *Hogg* that took twenty two years to get published because of the depth of perversion, especially sexual, it goes into. In it, Delany explores desire without limits, without guilt, which is what is required: how could we know or explore our desires if we explore them only within

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limits? How can we imagine new ways to live if we imprison our thoughts? Delany's writing is a deconstruction of the walls that humans have built for themselves and an exploration of our desires that extend beyond these walls.

For some people, anarchy is a question, asking something like, "wouldn't it be nice to live on my own, with people I have affinity with, not burning my eyes with screens, without enforcement of arbitrary rules and laws that I have no say in? Wouldn't it be nice not to have cables running across the ocean floor being eaten by sharks and not to have to see pelicans covered so thickly in oil that they cannot spread their wings?" In its finer moments, anarchy is a weaponized question. Milan Kundera wrote in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* that

*The stupidity of people comes from having an answer for everything. The wisdom of the novel comes from having a question for everything... The novelist teaches the reader to comprehend the world as a question... The totalitarian world, whether founded on Marx, Islam, or anything else, is a world of answers rather than questions. There, the novel has no place.*

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Delany explores what slavery means, how it affects us, and the question of whether BDSM and play-slavery, in other words slavery we choose, are effective ways of distorting and subverting the slavery we already are a part of, the slavery we don't choose.

What does it mean to live in a slave society? The US has currently around 2.5 million people in

prisons and jails. There are differences between the various forms of chattel slavery and wage-slavery, but the emotional power of the word is entirely appropriate. More forms of slavery exist than we could possibly know or understand. Slavery affects all of us and we are all complicit in it: most of the things we use daily are made by slaves, whether in the rare earth mines of Inner Mongolia, in clothing sweatshops, or at Foxconn (where suicide “safety nets” are placed on the factories). I say these things not to shame or guilt, but to acknowledge. I have no desire or interest in categorizing every form of slavery, trying to figure out which is worse and why. I would hope that anarchists are no longer interested in choosing between the lesser of evils. The question isn't how can we best categorize every privilege and every form of slavery and find out who is suffering the most. The question is, how did the world come to be this way, and how can we in our lives change our relationship to our situation?

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I have worked with children in a variety of capacities: as a tutor, a special ed teacher, and as a social worker. What is often called education, I consider a form of slavery. Can you imagine how weird it is to have someone you hardly know—because any adult at a school is treated as an authority—ask you if they are allowed to pee? Already, at an early age children are fitting into our hierarchies and accepting our authority. They know that to rebel carries consequence. There is a consequence for the child who decides they have to pee and walks out

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of the class to do so without saying a word, because they *have* to be in that classroom, it is not a choice. Then there is also the whole issue of compulsory labor and doing work that is not desired for the entirety of your school life. In the best case scenarios we leave school and take jobs, and have bosses, and we are ready for that because we are used to being bossed, we are used to submitting. Usually this is the point where anarchism intervenes.

Many anarchists tell us that we must struggle to end power, and that we must seek out egalitarianism and justice. But justice is a ghost, a phantom, a mirage that will forever remain intangible. Once someone has been hurt there is no way to even the scale, all that is left for the individual is to re-imagine and change their relationship to that pain. Hermann Broch, an Austrian author, has a line in his book *The Death of Virgil* where he describes slavery as “that senseless, no longer cruel-cruelty of unlimited power, devoid of every real purpose.” In other words, the desire has been taken out of us when the power relation becomes static and ceases to flow—when there is complete submission, the one wielding the power is no longer cruel, no longer able to act on their desires, and a void is left, an emptiness. This is what permeates society. Unlike in Ursula Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* for example, the beauty of Delany’s writing is that there is no room for leftism, moralizing, or simple solutions and answers. His ideas are too big to be bound up in the spectres of equality and justice. His worlds and

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universes cannot be pigeonholed as simply utopian or dystopian: often he creates a “perfect society” just to rip it apart with complications of people, ideas, and identities. His views on relationships and human life are irreducible to the patronizing organizing that permeates supposedly radical scenes. His writing explores power rather than categorizing it bad, contrasted to good freedom. Instead he offers us a world of possibilities and an endless web of questions.

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So, how the fuck did we get here? Where does the desire to enslave and be enslaved come from? It feels likely that at some point someone decided they wanted to enslave others around them for whatever reason, possibly the lust for domination, maybe because they wanted to sit in a temple and think all day while others built their houses and gathered their food, or maybe there is no way for language or thought to explain this phenomena. Yevgeny Zamyatin, a Russian sci-fi author once wrote “What have people—from the very cradle—prayed for, dreamed about, and agonized over? They have wanted someone, anyone, to tell them once and for all what happiness is—and then to attach them to this happiness with a chain.” Delany explores the concept of whether or not slavery(in this meaning, not making your own decisions) is happiness. He does this in his book *Stars in My Pockets Like Grains of Sand*. This book contains a universe of at least six thousand inhabited planets, most of which are run by something much like the internet, which he calls The Web. One of the main characters is born and

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raised on a world that has a particular type of slavery that is unique in the universe. It is called Radical Anxiety Termination. By changing the functioning of the brain, in just a few seconds the scientists on this world have figured out how to make humans no longer desire to choose, and be completely open to suggestion. This is a world on which (unlike most of the other thousands of planets) people who practice homosexuality, kink, and BDSM are hunted down and punished severely. Many in this world turn themselves into RATs and effectively become slaves working in the various industries on the planet. Near the end of the first part of the book, a woman (who is never named) decides that she wants a slave for herself, and kidnaps Rat Korga, a slave, and they go on the run together. Her first conversation with Korga (really she is just speaking to herself) explores this idea of happiness in slavery:

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*“This is crazy. This is more than crazy. It’s stupid! If they catch us, I don’t want to think about what’ll happen. What I want, you’re not supposed to have, here. I never thought of our world, with its endless deserts and orange sky and multilayered equatorial cities and great canyons and underground waterways as coy. But it is! It makes slaves, then says that individuals can’t own them, only institutions—because somehow institutions make slavery more humane! Well, I want a slave, my own slave, to do exactly what I want, the way I want it done, without question or complaint—a slave to do what I want to make me happy...Happiness! Yours?” She grinned*



at him. "Mine? No, not yours I guess. But if I could I'd make you free—before I made you serve me! I really would. Only I can't. So the only thing left is for you to make me free." She snorted "Or happy. Is it the same thing? Is happiness slavery? That's what they tell you at the Institute, isn't it? Slavery is happiness. Accepting slavery, becoming a rat, is happiness. Well, I don't believe it. I don't believe it at all! And even though you're a slave, I hope you learn that! Learn that from me. I swear, if I thought I could teach you that, I'd turn you loose this instant and be on my way. There are some things more important—than I am, to me. Nobody else believes me when I say it. But it's true."

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Delany has given us a glimpse into the mind of this woman who has taken a slave for herself. She has become caught up in what Delany calls the machinery of her desire. Her world is a world of repressed sexuality, institutional slavery, and economic disparity. At one point she asks her slave to fuck her. He tells her that he is gay, yet she does not care. Her desire is caught up and tied into the world in which she has been raised. Instead of exploring these desires she has with partners or friends, she has taken to a life of isolation, buying a slave and running away with him. Delany draws a similar parallel in his Neveryona series, which exists in world much like ours, except that dragons fill the skies and witches lurk outside the cities. Gorgik, one of the main characters, was a childhood slave in the Obsidian

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mines of Neveryona. He was there for some fifteen years until he became the sexual slave of an aristocrat who eventually freed him. Finally, he bought a slave and freed him, becoming Gorgik the Liberator, and they began to travel together and fight against slavery. Gorgik explains what this slavery means for him by saying that “because I spent my real youth as a real slave in your most real and royal obsidian mines, the machinery of my desire is caught up within the workings of the iron hinge. Slavery is, for me, not a word in a string of words, wrought carefully for the voice that will enunciate it for the play of glow and shade it can initiate in the playful mind. I cannot tell this minister what slavery means, for me, beyond slavery—not because desire clouds my judgement, but because I had the misfortune once to be a slave.”

This makes us ask the question of how we can find our own desires if our desires are caught up in the workings of the iron hinge. What is our relationship to the slavery that exists in our society and in societies all over this planet? How much does it affect our own desires, and how can we be aware of that, and possibly change it? Hermann Broch describes Virgil getting off a boat and witnessing chain gang slavery first hand: “it was outrageous to witness it and not make the slightest effort at interference, unable, perhaps even unwilling to interfere, it was outrageous to want to retain this happening, and outrageous the memory into which even it must be inscribed for all time!” (*The Death of Virgil*)

Our memory is inscribed with these instances

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of witnessing. When we step outside we are witness to hungry human beings sleeping on street corners, crowded buses with people on their way to absurd and miserable jobs, and other horrors of modern society. This isn't even taking into account the witnessing we do by reading the news and hearing about ISIS or whatever war is currently being waged. We are witness to it all and we are powerless. This is a harsh reality many do not want to admit even to themselves. One response has been to demand that people fight to end power. However, instead of fighting the same seemingly never-ending and ineffectual struggle to end power, first we should attempt to understand our desires to wield power and to have it wielded against us.

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This is the point at which BDSM comes in. In his book *Structures of Desire: Erotic Power in the Speculative Fiction of Octavia Butler and Samuel Delany* Lewis Call writes

*Post-anarchism implies and includes a crucial sexual anarchism. Indeed, the disruption of conventional forms of sexual identity is one of the most powerful moves available to the post-anarchist...Post-anarchism enables a system of erotic ethics for an age beyond humanism. That system endorses radical relations of erotic power up to and including consensual play-slavery. This dramatic form of power exchange mimics the structure of slavery, but in a way which produces radically different subjective meaning for the participants: unlike slavery, play-slavery can be*

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*ethical and erotic. Post-anarchism suggests that ethical structures of erotic power (including those of play-slavery) may actually sap the power of their non-consensual doppelgangers.*

BDSM and kink let us play with power and deconstruct our own relationships to symbols of power and relationships of power. By changing our relationships to ourselves, by unhinging the lock on our desires (or hinging it) we are able to move away from the naive notion that our identities are static. This type of play offers a fluid relationship with our desires and our choices, instead of a static one. Anarchy is fluidity, an ever-changing, ever-questioning, playful interaction with the world around us. Someone once said “if you can’t laugh at something, it owns you.” I would argue that if you can’t change your relationship to something it owns you. Many of our relationships within this society seem to be fixed. Our relationships to police, to jails, to working meaningless jobs to get by, are all static. But our relationships with each other and ourselves are not completely imprisoned yet, so we may still retain the ability to change them. Perhaps changing these two relationships is possible, as opposed to the seeming impossibility of changing our relationship to society and its various systems.

There is a lot of rhetoric in radical spaces around people wanting to be free, but is that really the case? What about people who choose to submit to one of the various types of authority: church, job, country, or partner? Our repressed desires have few outlets.

Delany's Gorgik the Liberator has recognized that he desires the play-slavery relationship as both master and slave, because he had been a very real slave in very real obsidian mines. Now a lengthy quote from Neveryona to examine the play-slavery relationship between Sarg and Gorgik.

*Now there are some, who, wishing to see the world more unified than common sense suggests it could possibly be, say that to use terms of anger and rage in the throes of desire indicates some great malaise, not only of camel drivers, but of the whole world; that desire itself must be a form of anger and is thus invalid as an adjunct to love... even the most foul mouthed camel driver knows a curse from a kiss, whatever signs accompany it. Enriched pleasure is still pleasure. Enriched anger is still anger... A word spoken in the noon sun does not necessarily mean the same as it does when uttered in the moonlight...*

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*The signs by which slavery manifests itself in the world in many ways resemble the camel driver's curse. The collar itself may be a sign of all social oppression, yet its wearing can also be an adjunct of pleasure. My little barbarian prince, while we fought and loved together, was very much one out to have the world more unified—while I, in such matters am, a camel driver. Sarg claimed he felt no bodily pleasure in the collar. Under the sun he and I wore it to advance our fight against slavery, to infiltrate and obliterate it. At night? Well, he tolerated it—at first. Sometimes*

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he laughed at it. Later he began to argue against it; its oppressive meaning debased love; its sexual meaning made of slavery an even more terrifying mystery. Finally he refused to wear it any longer. Nor did I press him to it—since he allowed it to me. But as Sarg wore the collar less and less by night, I could not help but notice the change in the way he wore it by day. That he wore it much more by day, while that is true, is not so much the point as that he now insisted on wearing it... That indeed was one of our slippery arguments over the slippery meaning of the iron ring. But from then on, in our forays against the slavers of the west, more and more he demanded to be the one to play the slave—because as he would now chide me, first jokingly, then seriously, I could not be trusted in the role. For me, you see, it was too charged a sign. Yet, as soon as he had the collar on, as soon as he had been 'sold' and had gained admittance into the slave pens, he would needlessly prolong his time there, bragging sometimes to the bored guards, sometimes to the confused slaves, of his exploits outside...several times by such behavior he put his own life and mine in danger—his reasoning was that whatever eccentricities he indulged within the iron band, they were better than any actions I might perform, as his were not contaminated by the secret productions of lust. Yet to put the collar and walk into a group of slaves and their masters seemed to throw Sarg into a kind of trance, a strangely wreckless state where

ecstasy and obliviousness, daring and distraction, were one with bravery itself...carelessness? Forgetfulness? Heedless braggadocio? What did any of them matter if we were still alive—if we could still free slaves? If we ourselves were still truly free? I loved him. And I believe he loved me—certainly he was honestly and infinitely grateful to me, for he would have been a true slave without me...

Sarg said he felt no lust within the iron. I say I do. Why should I assume he spoke any less truly of his feelings than I speak of mine? If such a sign can shift so easily from oppression to desire, it can shift in other ways—toward power, perhaps, and aggression, toward the bitterness of misjudged freedoms by one who must work outside the civil structure. The chance organization of my inner life and those situations life has thrown me into have taught me, painfully, a sign can slide from meaning to meaning. What prevented it from sliding another way for Sarg? For me, the collar worn against the will meant social oppression, and the collar worn willfully meant desire. For Sarg, the collar was social oppression, as well as all asocial freedom. Nothing in our lives, save my anger, challenged that meaning for him. Any my anger was a lover's anger, which too often feels to the loved one as oppressive as a parent's. We fought—the two of us—for a vision of society, and yet we lived outside society—like soldiers fighting for a beautiful and wondrous city whose

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*walls they have nevertheless been forbidden to enter. Sarg did not have the meanings I had to help him hold his own meanings stable. That is all. And my desire's position in this blind and brutal land means only that i know desire's workings better than some—but it does not make me either a better or a worse Liberator. Only what I do with my understanding changes that.*

This passage displays the complexity of the worlds that Sam Delany imagines. Nothing is simple, nothing is easy, everything is a chaotic swirl of emotions, meanings, and ideas. Sarg has taken a hard stance and has lost fluidity with his sexual *and* his material relationship with slavery. The iron hinge for him has stuck as a symbol of oppression. He clearly still feels some desire with it, but as Gorgik says, he has no meaning to hold his meanings stable. Without exploration of our desires and making some attempt to understand them, how are we not slaves to them? And in Sarg's case, as he became a slave to his desire, it led him back into actual slavery. Lewis Call writes that “by participating in a kind of play-slavery, Gorgik and Small Sarg reappropriate the symbolic structure of the socio-economic slavery that they hate, and use that structure to fill their erotic needs.”

Call writes extensively on kink theory and argues that through desire we can create a self. When speaking of Gorgik he writes that “It is important to notice that the ‘he’ created in this way is not the self created by modern humanism or the liberal

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state, for it was Lacanian desire that brought Gorgik into existence, rather than any rationalist Cartesian *cogito*.” It is important that Call brings up humanism and the state when discussing desire, as they are both ways that we cage our desires and ideas. The state does this with laws and labor. And we do it to ourselves through modern humanist values. So can we change our relationship to these? Taking an anti-humanist and post-left stance is an obvious starting point in terms of ideas and how to better relate to the world around us. But what could this look like in our personal lives?