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Sexuality and Textuality

Short Paper 1

The Erotic Versus Modern Incorporeality and Portrayals of Feminine Bodies

Carmen Maria Machado presents many different ideas involving women, especially queer women, in her book of short stories *Her Body and Other Parties*. The idea that extends to all of her stories is the use of explicit, profane language and her unabashed portrayal of sexual intimacy. Audre Lorde, a notable black lesbian feminist, suggests that all women possess something she coined as the erotic, a sensational and creative energy that can build communities; however, she notes that pornography is in binary opposition to the erotic. In this paper, I will discuss how Machado's decision to use explicit portrayals of sex, the feminine body, and pornography interacts with Lorde's antiquated and problematic views on the genre of pornography and the erotic. Additionally, I will delve into Machado's ideas on the societal expectations for women to partake in erasure and incorporeality, using T. Jackie Cuevas' explication of Chicana masculinities to emphasize how a feminine body is requisite for feminine identities. With themes of visibility and sexuality, I will point towards Lorde's narrow perceptions of the erotic in relation to corporeality.

In Audre Lorde's essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power", she describes the erotic as a special kind of consciousness that when possessed, can challenge and subvert paradigms of power that exclude women. She attaches the erotic to the feminine body but carries the notion that pornography is absurd and abusive to feeling or sensitivity, which is vital for the

erotic to flourish in women. She states, “pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling” (Lorde 54). Lorde is interested in power dynamics, as marginalized groups like women are continually suppressed and often unrecognized by the dominant groups. Lorde suggests that the erotic comes from within, but can be an external force that builds bridges between people when recognized; without this recognition, pornography ensues, which she describes as “the abuse of feeling” (Lorde 59). These ideas seem to be progressive for women, but still exclude women who partake in sex work. There seems to be a contradiction in Lorde’s theories because she suggests that the erotic is present in bodies, but often regards the use of bodies in sexual intimacy to be obscene. This is problematic, especially for modern women who reclaim their sexuality through public displays of their bodies; the disjunct lays in how Lorde separates the erotic completely from pornography, creating a binary that is excluding to some groups of women who use exhibitionism as a way of reclaiming suppressed femininity. Pornography might be synonymous with carnality and obscenity for some, but the erotic should be an inclusive ideal that is open to all groups of women, whether or not they embrace their bodies in more public manners.

Machado’s short stories subvert and challenge conservative outlooks on sexuality in literature. She gives voice to women, especially queer women, and acknowledges that sex and sensuality is a crucial and prominent aspect of the feminine experience. She gives fearless and elegant descriptions of sex in her short story “The Husband Stitch.” For example, Machado writes explicitly about intimate acts like fellatio: “When he tells me that he wants my mouth, the length of my throat, I teach myself not to gag and take all of him into me, moaning around the saltiness” (Machado 9). Later, she describes her speaker having intercourse with her fiancé

moments before her wedding, leading to her having semen dripping down her leg as she walks down the aisle (Machado 11). These are moments that are uncomfortable because they illuminate the dark places of intimacy that are usually repressed in women. It is reasonable to suggest that this kind of language is profane and obscene, but I understand Machado's explicit depictions of sex and feminine bodies as a method of patriarchal resistance. Patriarchal systems, including the problematic male gaze, oppresses female and queer groups. The beauty of Machado's writing is that it always acknowledges these flawed paradigms without trying to force a didactic response; this is to say that this writing is not pornographic, but literary, and the explicit language and portrayals of sex is done with the purpose of making readers empathize with the discomfort women and their bodies feel. Many of the spaces women and queer groups are pushed into are uncomfortable, hurtful, and often unseen. So, the obscenity in Machado's stories is used as a tool of reclamation, to take back control of narratives usually controlled by patriarchal systems.

Audre Lorde may have found the aforementioned portrayals of bodies and sex to be pornographic, a degrading, exploitative, and unproductive way to see feminine corporeality. Machado is reworking this perspective of the erotic through her unabashed explicitness, negotiating with Lorde's ideas, and finding a middle ground where pornography and the erotic are not always in opposition to each other. Pornography is explicitly described in Machado's story "Difficult at Parties", where the speaker is reconciling an implied sexual trauma. In this story, this woman hears the voices that underpin the pornography, describing them as "a steam running beneath the ice" and a "voiceunder" (Machado 224). The words she hears are not the usual profane language that is actually being said, but the voices give layers to the people in the films, establishing humanity and narrative that the speaker can relate to. The pornography turns

from problematic to inspiring as the speaker takes a camera, records her own intimate moments with her boyfriend, and rewatches it as a way to reconcile her own past with sexual trauma. Machado's speaker not only acknowledges the humanity through her trauma, noting that her body is "still striped with the yellowish stains of fading bruises" (Machado 241) but also reclaims it through intimacy and voyeurism. In fact, she ends the story, and book, with a sense of relief: "I look down at my hands. They are dry and not shaking. I look back up at the screen, and I begin to listen" (Machado 241). In contrast to Lorde's perspective on pornography and the erotic, Machado has a more inclusive understanding that sex and sensuality are not synonymous with shame. The erotic can be embraced in many ways, and thinking of pornography in a fetishizing, shameful way undercuts the inner erotic power that all women possess.

Where Lorde is successful in her theory is acknowledging that the erotic can be conducive to community building and social change. Lorde expresses this most adequately when she says "the sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference" (Lorde 56). This is the power of the erotic, but there is yet again another contradiction in this thought-process. Lorde consistently understands the erotic as an omnipresent mechanism that can be separated from the body; yet, the erotic really only exists in whole, feminine bodies. She directly states that the erotic has a motion with her body: "In the way my body stretches to music and opens into response... which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether that is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea" (Lorde 56-57). Lorde negotiates feminine power

with the sensation of the body. So, it is reasonable to only understand the erotic through tangible corporeality.

Machado yet again subverts these ideas through her two short stories “Real Women Have Bodies” and “Eight Bites.” In the former, Machado develops the notion of incorporeality through women quite literally fading away and attaching themselves to the insides of dresses, which are symbolic of femininity for many women, or at least that is how they are portrayed in popular media. This harrowing narrative depicts bodies fading into nothingness, though the speaker is able to notice them: “I see them all, faintly luminous, moving about in their husks. But they remain. They don’t move, they never move” (Machado 148). This incorporeality is connected to the male gaze and systems of oppression that make women feel unseen apart from the objectification their bodies endure. The media and popular culture reduce women to the way their bodies are perceived. In a deft move, Machado writes the media as distrustful and spiteful of these fading women, notable when a newscaster says “ ‘I don’t trust anything that can be incorporeal and isn’t dead’ ” (Machado 146). Machado twists this focus on bodies into the haunting acknowledgment that objectification makes women feel incorporeal. It is evident that Machado considers how women and queer groups feel as though they do not deserve to take up space in the worlds they inhabit. Through systems of oppression, marginalized communities feel obliged to mold themselves into something small and quiet both physically and emotionally.

This forced notion of insubstantiality, or the expectation to become less substantial, connects to Machado’s story “Eight Bites,” which illustrates women desiring to be thinner in order to garner the ideal feminine body type. These women go to great lengths to achieve this goal, even getting a transformative surgery that leads to extreme weight loss. This story deals

with corporeality more physically, highlighting the problems behind societal expectations for women to change their bodies in unhealthy, unnatural ways. The speaker of this story even asks, “will I ever be done, transformed in the past tense, or will I always be transforming, better and better until I die?” (Machado 168) In reality, the speaker is not transforming for the better; in fact, her relationship is strained with her daughter and she has to deal with what I ascertained to be her conscious made into a grotesque creature that lives in her house. She recognizes the mistake she made by getting the procedure on her deathbed, where she understands that she did not truly love herself: “I will curl into her body, which was my body once, but I was a poor caretaker and she was removed from my charge” (Machado 168). Machado is illustrating how society is pushing expectations of perfection on women and manifesting toxic self-perceptions. In the last two stories I have discussed, Machado is commenting on visibility, or a lack thereof, in relation to women and queer groups, breaking down systems of oppression by using the expectation and experience of becoming insubstantial and incorporeal to emphasize how problematic and deeply ingrained this issue is.

Audre Lorde’s theory on the erotic is troublesome because it demands that this inner energy be separated from certain uses of the body. She acknowledges that women are oppressed, but does not consider how someone who feels incorporeal can possess and use the erotic productively. In reality, a tangible body is necessary for identities to latch onto, a concept that is supported by another theorist, T. Jackie Cuevas. In her chapter about Chicana masculinities in the book *Post-Borderlandia*, Cuevas explores how the identity of “butch” works with gender orientation and sexuality. She delves into Cherrie Moraga’s perspective of butch expression, describing it as a persona adopting “an outward or visible masculinity” and can be read as

“embodying an empowering form of gendered, feminine vulnerability” (Cuevas 32). Cuevas understands that “butch” is an identity that is simultaneously visual and internal, which combats some of Lorde’s ideas of the erotic. My reading is that “butch” expression can be the erotic made tangible for some women, meaning that the visual representations of masculinities require a feminine body to do so. This is further supported by Cuevas’ discussion on Adelina Anthony’s performance of *Mastering Sex and Tortillas*, where embodying the masculine butch identity is contingent upon a feminine body being malleable and tangible. For example, Papi Duro (the character in the performance), declares “that the butch agent can use the shears as fingernail clippers, suggesting that short fingernails are a visible sign of butch identity or are requisite for butch sexual prowess” (Cuevas 44). Embodying masculine traits is arguably a form of embracing the inner erotic because it is productive for identity expression. This is not to say that Lorde would be in opposition to the ideas about “butch” identity, but Cuevas is suggesting that outward expression of the feminine body is necessary for cultivating salience in one’s identity. Machado also understands identity as being directly tied to the free expression of corporeality, whereas Lorde pigeon-holes the ways in which the erotic can be embraced. For Machado, visibility of intimacy, sexuality, and sensuality are important for a woman’s identity because it subverts paradigms of oppression; the issue with Lorde’s theory is that it is not entirely sexually liberated and criticizes overt presentations of sexuality when these presentations can indeed be a methodology of reclamation, just as the embodiment of masculinities with a feminine body can be productive.

Audre Lorde’s theory on the erotic is generally fruitful for the marginalized groups of women and queer identities because it illustrates an inner power and energy that is conducive to

building up individuals and establishing communities through shared struggle. Yet, her ideas on pornography and profanity prove to be antiquated in conversation with Machado's writings that give visibility to sensuality and the feminine body. T. Jackie Cuevas's chapter on Chicana masculinities showcases how a feminine body is necessary for identities to latch onto, thus supporting the idea that visibility of identities, including the sexual ones that Machado writes about, is a way of utilizing the erotic. Putting all three authors together, it is evident that there is a shared goal to give women and queer women power through the erotic, but the ambiguity hovering around sex and sensuality in Lorde's theory is problematic; indeed, Machado's short stories in *Her Body and Other Parties* highlight the erotic in a more liberated manner that perhaps gives marginalized feminine groups more agency over their own narratives.

Works Cited

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