

The Slut You Are: West, Kincaid, and Sexton on Subaltern Sexuality

*Why is it, my beloved binary friends, that you are convinced that
only subalterns possess an identity?*

— Paul Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak?*

At the École de la Cause Freudienne's 2019 conference "Women in Psychoanalysis," non-binary body and transgender man Paul Preciado was booed off the stage for asking a question: "Can the monster speak?" (11). Following the work of Gayatri Spivak, Preciado proposes that if psychoanalysts wish to escape the patriarchal norms they've created and sustained, they must abandon the assumption that the sovereign Subject is a cisgender, heterosexual, white man. Instead, he suggests creating a new grammar for sexual deviance, postcolonial upheaval, and racial reckoning can allow psychoanalysis to "set Oedipus free, join the monsters," and "become a tool for the invention of subjectivities that are dissident to the norm" (95, 97). The misaligned centering of the sovereign Subject, however, predates the conference. Instead, I propose that by examining the sexualization of women we might open the discussion to how subalterns' fates are pre-determined by patriarchal gazes before they ever speak.

Racialization, Animalization, and Psychoanalytic Frames

In Rebecca West's "Indissoluble Matrimony" (1914), the protagonist, George, inflicts sexualized, animalized, and racialized gazes onto his wife, Evadne. The short story follows a man deeply dissatisfied with his marriage despite no signs that anything has gone wrong; in fact, his wife appears to be a model homemaker and companion. Nevertheless, George mentally distorts her actions to justify attempting to kill her. When he arrives home and notices her touching her hair, he sees her as "strok[ing] it with secretive enjoyment, as a cat licks its fur" (West 469). From a third-party perspective, Evadne moved her hair. From George's perspective,

she descended into animality. The deployment of the word “licks” in conjunction with “secretive” invites the reader to imagine oral sex in subversive contexts. By reconfiguring Evadne’s mundane act, George has placed a nonconsensual, sexualizing gaze onto her. The opening description of her adjusting her hair reflects how “the masturbatory *jouissance* of the moment is represented as animal” which “makes her enjoyment especially threatening to George’s phallogentric economy” (Rohman 31). George has implicitly assumed the role of the sovereign Subject. Without questioning his privileged position, he feels as though his “phallogentric economy” is disrupted by the possibility of his wife experiencing pleasure apart from him. To borrow Gilles Deleuze’s otherwise optimistic term, she has *become* both animal and temptress without speaking a word. Her “secretive enjoyment” acts as a reminder that Evadne has her own desire and will: she is an agent. As such, affirmations of her existence interrupt George’s mental image of her and must be fatally subdued.

Irrespective of whether or not Evadne received gratification from this small act, George’s animalizing of her demonstrates how sexuality and race intersect to create unique forms of violence against Black women. The only way he can mentally mediate between his sexual desires and aggressive reactions is by refocusing onto her race. His whiteness juxtaposed against her Blackness provides essential context as readers watch West follow the Victorian pattern of comparing racialized bodies to animals as a form of dehumanization. When George first met Evadne, he heard her singing with a “smoldering contralto such as only those of black blood can possess” while her “great black eyes lay on him with the innocent shamelessness of a young animal” (West 471). The description of her voice is simultaneously sexualizing and masculinizing: “smoldering” carries lustful connotations while “contralto” voices are considered abnormally deep for women. Furthermore, by over-emphasizing her physical characteristics with

the word “great” and reminding the reader of her difference from his Aryan gaze with “black eyes,” George continually places race first in his description of her. George’s perspective did not emerge out of nowhere. It is a response to the centering of whiteness, heterosexuality, and cisgender masculinity by the psychoanalytic and epistemological frames that subtly inform his actions. Through his gaze, George’s psyche necessarily displaces Evadne’s humanity in favor of the sexual, racial, and animalistic view he has projected onto her.

The Role of the Slut in Jamaica Kincaid’s “Girl”

In “Girl” (1978), Jamaica Kincaid recounts a slew of commands from an implied maternal figure to her daughter on how to be an acceptable “kind of woman”: one who is capable but docile, confident but quiet, and most importantly, satiates the desires of the men around her (1340; further quotations from this page). The undertone of the instructions — ranging from “set a table for tea” to “iron your father’s khaki shirt” — is one of utility. For a woman to be a productive member of the family, she must forfeit her own desires and fulfill a functional role. However, independent of her actions, the narrator repeatedly warns the listener to not become “the slut [the speaker] knows you are so bent on becoming.” The deployment of multiple ontological terms signifies to the reader that the slut is not only a subject position that women necessarily occupy from birth (“are”), but also grows into (“becoming”). The two terms in conjunction indicate that the slut, as a marker of identity, transgresses conventional conceptions of time. Furthermore, the narrator tries to teach the girl “how to behave in the presence of men who don’t know [her] very well, and this way they won’t recognize immediately the slut” in her. The term “slut” is both intrinsic to a woman’s subjectivity and an identity that is reiteratively conferred onto her by the gazes of the men — and women — around her.

The jarring nature of the word “slut” interrupts the cadence of the piece: while the author imparts utilitarian advice primarily confined to the domestic sphere, the lines about sexuality pull the reader back into the insidious nature of the instructions. While knowing how to “set a table” or “iron” are useful life skills for everyone, “slut” reminds the reader that these are all moving components in a broader matrix of violently enforced gender roles. The patriarchy brands a woman as a “slut” before she has the chance to decide for herself whom she might want to be. Following Kincaid’s distinctive style, it might be said that through the male gaze, the slut walks down the street; the slut stays home; the slut irons her father’s pants; the slut can’t make up her mind; the slut is a woman; the slut is every woman; the slut is no woman.

The Gaze and Emancipatory Potential

A close reading of Jamaica Kincaid’s “Girl” and Rebecca West’s “Indissoluble Matrimony” points to how deviant bodies are victims of patriarchal gazes. Nevertheless, their objectification does not happen without resistance. Drawing from the work of bell hooks, the gaze might be rewritten as a site for violence *and* emancipatory self-definition. In *Black Looks*, hooks argues that the gazes of Black people emerged out of a “rebellious desire” to “defiantly declare: ‘Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality’” (116). In this sense, the object of the gaze engages in a script-flipping act where they reclaim (“my”) and weaponize (“stare”) the very tool that has made them subaltern. The act of gazing back introduces a profoundly existential opportunity for subalterns to determine their identities outside of psychoanalytic projections of what constitutes a Subject. Movements such as #BlackIsBeautiful, Gulabi Gang, and #MeToo have utilized the radical act of staring down the patriarchal-colonial order to address oppressive institutions and affirm minoritarian identity positions. Arguably,

countergazing as a strategy for radical emancipation often exists in the very same sites where a violent gaze was first deployed.

For example, in “Indissoluble Matrimony,” Evadne countergazes despite her husband’s attempts to subdue her. This process begins when he initiates an explosive argument over her attending a socialist convention:

“Evadne!” He sprang to his feet. “You’re preparing your speech!”

She did not move. “I am,” she said.

“Damn it, you shan’t speak!”

“Damn it, I will!”

“Evadne, you shan’t speak! If you do I swear to God above I’ll turn you out into the streets.” (West 474)

The parallel structure of George’s demand — “Damn it, you shan’t speak!” — and Evadne’s defiant response — “Damn it, I will!” — attests to the power of countergazing. The forceful “damn it” preceding George’s command only gains strength when it is weaponized by Evadne in her reply. She has reclaimed his imperative for herself. In a sort of epistemological rupture, Evadne answers Spivak’s 1988 question not only with “I will!” but also matches her husband’s urgency to emphasize that she acts both of her own volition and in opposition to those who endanger her livelihood. Of course, her response does not exist in a vacuum: George retorts with a threat to “turn [her] out into the streets.” The emancipatory potential of the gaze is not without risk. Moreover, to speak as a subaltern is always a risk. To be subaltern is a risk. The attempt at self-definition necessarily exists in a do-or-die context.

Perhaps the most salient example of a subaltern gazing back from female poet Anne Sexton (1928-1974). Sexton attended therapy with psychoanalyst Dr. Martin Orne, during which

many appointments were taped for her to reflect on and transcribe (Harris). In one session, she discussed telling her husband about one of her nightmares. When his response demonstrated that he didn't understand what she was saying, she began hitting the floor with her hands. When Orne asked why she reacted this way, Sexton replied:

If you're pounding on the floor then you [are] crouched therefore more like a child or an animal [...] When you hear these things... your voice, your words, [...] they don't break through [...] It doesn't make any sense, try again, try another way, listen to this, does this make sense (he doesn't understand) no. I've got to stop this... because whatever he's saying it doesn't make any sense to me [...] because I can't see it... And it doesn't make what I'm seeing any different. (Sexton)¹

Sexton's struggle is two-fold: firstly, she encounters a communicative gap between her experience of the nightmare and her retelling to her husband; secondly, she faces a larger battle against the predetermined explanations for her behaviors. When sharing her nightmare with her husband leads to an unproductive response, she feels the need to adopt a rawer approach in the form of pounding on the floor. Despite this tactic failing, she still wants to "try again, try another way." When the subaltern speaks and is not heard, s/She is forced to act. s/She is forced to pound on the floor with her bare hands. And, beyond h/Her valiant attempts to have h/Her experiences known, men pathologize h/Her reaction. Sexton's use of parentheses varies between describing her actions, recounting Dr. Orne's responses, or indicating tone. As such, her choice to add "(he doesn't understand)" is uniquely key because the unspecified "he" could refer to either her husband or psychoanalyst. Irrespective of whom she meant to refer to, the fact that either could function as a reasonably inferred antecedent speaks to how heterosexual marriage and the

¹ Ellipses in brackets are added for clarity; Other ellipses are copied from Sexton's original transcript. Some letters are capitalized for clarity.

medical system wielded power over her. In line with a Foucauldian analysis, it might be said that the unspecified “he” symbolizes the broader biopolitical forces that subdue the lives of deviant bodies such as women and the mentally ill. “He doesn’t understand” because “he” has never been trained to listen to women as agents. She is always the patient, the insane wife, or the subaltern, but she is never a fellow Subject. The therapy transcripts speak to how the countergaze could be a look, but it could also be pounding on the floor, a speech act, or a strategically placed set of parentheses: all of which align with hooks’ demand that countergazing be utilized discursively.

Secondly, the shortcomings of a psychiatric model that centers cisgender masculinity appear in Dr. Orne’s treatment approaches. Orne’s background in strict Freudian psychoanalysis emerges through these tapes, especially in a recording of Sexton on August 16th, 1963. When she cried while describing the sexual abuse she experienced at the hands of her father,² Orne replies that she “wanted [her] father like every little girl wanted her father” (Orne and Sexton). While some have suggested that Orne’s methodology was merely “a product of his time and education,” I believe his response contributed to the repeated minimizing of women’s experiences with sexual violence (Harris). Orne’s rewriting of Sexton’s abuse paints her as a desiring subject who “wanted” her father, but also just like “every little girl.” It reflects the “practices of observation, objectification, punishment, exclusion and death put in place by psychoanalysis . . . [onto] women who have been raped or sexually abused” (Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak?*, 74). In returning to our discourse about the slut, it can be concluded that Orne’s branding of Sexton as a person who “wanted” it represents the full violence of psychoanalysis on women. “Observation” materialized in his tone as he coolly asserted facts about Sexton’s alleged will; “objectification” emerged in the false proposition that a child could engage in a sexual —

² See Middlebrook’s *Anne Sexton: A Biography*.

slutty — act. The “punishment” was retrofitting Sexton into an example for a theory her therapist so desperately wanted to be true; “exclusion” came when she received zero emotional support for her trauma. Finally, “death” appeared to Sexton as the only antidote to the horrifically reductive responses from her doctor. Ironically, despite constantly deploying an evaluative gaze from their constitutive position of privilege, the men around her could not “see” what Sexton needed in her most vulnerable moments.

Sluts, Subalterns, and Solidarity

Psychoanalytic discourse has assumed a tabula rasa Subject is white, male, cisgender, heterosexual and exists in opposition to the subaltern: a fringe identity category including migrants, sex workers, the disabled, racialized bodies, and more. In creating this false dialectic, the field has disregarded dissident subjectivities as uninteresting additions to its canons. However, the supposedly neutral Subject inadvertently gives Himself an identity in the very process of branding women with the identity of the slut. When the narrator in “Girl” speaks to the young woman, she temporarily assumes the role of the hegemonic male figure. Similarly, when George sexualizes Evadne as an animalized and raced body, he solidifies his white supremacist patriarchal assumptions. Finally, Orne’s description of the child Sexton as a willful and sexual agent illuminates his allegiance first to the Freudian Subject before the patient. The three cases exemplify how gazes cohere subalterns before they ever act. Some academics have argued that repressed subjectivities operate as an “affirmation of non-existence” that indicates “there is nothing to say, to see, to know” (Michel Foucault qtd. in Spivak 61). However, Spivak’s counterpoint that “the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling . . . caught between tradition and modernization” speaks to the sluts in West’s and Kincaid’s works and Sexton’s journals (Spivak 61). Irrespective of how patriarchal gazes

perceive them, these women are operating in the liminal space “between tradition and modernization.” They must hem their skirts and love their husbands. But they are also intimately aware of the political moment surrounding them — they attend socialist rallies, work on their mental health, and feed their families in the face of rising costs. Despite their countless domestic duties, they find opportunities to express agency. In this sense, the slut’s sheer existence *interrupts* the otherwise comfortable question of how Subjects perceive them.

While psychoanalysis carries an objectifying gaze, fusing Spivak’s theory of the subaltern with hooks’s countergazing method demonstrates how the gaze can be reclaimed as a tool to unify deviant bodies. As one realizes that “subjectivity does not merely consist of talking about oneself . . . be this talking indulgent or critical,” they become equipped with the knowledge that subalterns span a variety of identity categories (Trinh Minh-ha qtd. in hooks, 128). For example, the narrator in “Girl” might not share the experiences of her daughter’s generation; however, she understands the importance of passing down organic knowledge. In this sense, the subaltern gaze demands more from its carriers than simply looking back or even internally. It commands the subaltern to look *around*. Through shared commitments to anti-racism, combatting the dominant colonial order, and upending patriarchy’s terroristic regime, subalterns might begin to launch projects that liberate not one body, but the multitude’s. Subalterns are equipped with unique experiences that generate sensitivity for subject positions outside their own. Looking around speaks to how intersectional commitments proliferate into shared stories, alternative ways of occupying space, and new methods for solidarity — a slutty solidarity, even.

In line with Preciado’s demand for a new grammar to describe subversive subjectivities, one might argue that every act outside of the neatly demarcated list of acceptable tasks for women is slutty. It is slutty to write essays; it is slutty to go for a walk; it is slutty to cook fritters

in sweet oil.³ For the subaltern, redefining the term “slut” offers a profound opportunity to contest the institutional forces (rape culture, barriers to education, stigma around divorce) and individual forces (sexualization in mundane acts, daily chores, unsympathetic husbands) that otherwise confine h/Her life. Identifying with the epithet “slut” is itself a form of gazing *back* at patriarchal forces and *around* at fellow subalterns affected by a psychoanalytic model that centers cisgender heterosexual white masculinity. Agential acts — slutty or not — demonstrate how women and other subaltern subjects affirm their self-defined identity within societies that demand they submit themselves to the men and families around them. And the agential act of gazing around lends itself to new forms of radical empathy and community. While Spivak and Preciado asked about who has the agency to speak, the writing and lives of West, Kincaid, and Sexton indicate that deviant bodies are most certainly speaking. More importantly, they’ve shown that when Subalterns speak, they are gazed at. Perhaps, then, the most interruptive question remains: can the Subaltern counter gaze?

³ The style calls on Kincaid’s “Girl,” but also Preciado’s *Testo Junkie* and *An Apartment on Uranus*.

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