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On Patriarchal Subjugation of the Erotic in “Tall Tales from the Mekong Delta”

Audre Lorde’s description of the erotic is simple: an inner, suppressed self that, when discovered, permits female strength, feeling, and true connection (Lorde). This definition, paraphrased from Lorde’s piece, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” is empowering in the face of a society which, for decades, has been saturated by patriarchal ideas. When viewing Kate Braverman’s “Tall Tales from the Mekong Delta” through this lens, it leaves room for speculation of the erotic’s influence—or lack thereof—within the narrative. Is the narrator in touch with any feeling, or merely sensation? Does the prevalence of her addiction mean that she is incapable of channeling the erotic? While it is tempting to answer these questions without outside context, the systemic issues of patriarchal subjugation become critical to achieve full understanding of the matter at hand. In the face of oppression from a patriarchal society, our narrator has turned to addiction; she has turned to substance abuse in search for relief, escape, or both. Her transformation from childhood—a time when she was in touch with a powerful force within her—to adulthood allows the reader to see how the erotic has morphed within her, and how it has been suppressed. The narrator’s experience and ultimate rejection from the modern patriarchal society has ultimately led to the suppression of her eroticism; while we see glimpses of the erotic in her past and in the present, the society in which she lives ultimately prevails, and leads to a sensation-filled existence.

In “Tall Tales from the Mekong Delta,” Braverman presents the reader with an image of a 38-year-old woman who, after living in a society saturated with patriarchal ideals, has been left

detached and vulnerable. Our narrator is divorced and left to raise her child as a single mother, and—as far as we know—appears to not have a dating life outside of that with Lenny, as her routine is filled with meetings, “psychiatrist, then manicure” appointments, et cetera (Braverman 89). In the beginning of the story, the narrator is depicted “wearing pink aerobic pants, a pink T-shirt with KAUAI written across the chest, and tennis shoes. She had just come from the gym” (Braverman 89). Immediately the reader is presented with an image of an infantilized woman, who dresses childishly in an all pink outfit, which sets up the scene to emphasize her acclimation to the patriarchal society and the suppression of her erotic. She is also accustomed to the cyclical nature of her life without much thought, as Lenny easily picks up on the repetitive nature of her routine (Braverman 92). In addition, she has become completely desensitized to her own life and her unchanging schedule—as the reader sees that she has become normalized to the endless meetings, and endless appointments—which is emphasized in her mentioning that, “We are born, we eat and sleep, conspire and mourn, a birth, a betrayal, an excursion to the harbor, and it’s done” (Braverman 99). She mentions this without emotion, as though she is detached from the repetitive nature of her life that she has been left with. She is 38 years old, a single mother, and has plenty of life ahead of her, but is unfeeling in most aspects of her life. This is the “unrecognized feeling” that Lorde mentions; though power can be found when channeling the erotic, the “suppression of the erotic” is what leaves women feeling “contemptible”, much like our narrator is in the society in which she lives (Lorde 1). Her rejection from society, seen in her divorce and other circumstances, has left her vulnerable in all aspects of her life.

Though the narrator’s erotic is suppressed, the reader sees that this has not always been the case. Through an introspective glimpse into her past, the narrator mentions that “She could remember being a child. (...) It does not occur to you that you can break the rules. The world is a

collection of absolutes and spells. You know words have a power. You are entranced. The world is a soft blue” (Braverman 100). Although most scenes in the story are devoid of feeling or emotion, this scene is full of discovery and wonder, and one of the most revealing sections of the story. She has discovered a “power” within the world, and thus within her, at one time of her life; she has not always been desensitized and submissive to society. This “power” is the eroticism within her, which “arises from (the) deepest and nonrational knowledge” (Lorde 1). The narrator comes to discover this power naturally and without any previous knowledge of it in childhood, baring very similar resemblance to Lorde’s version of the erotic. Though the narrator is desensitized in the present, she recalls a time in which she was able to channel the internal erotic within her. If the erotic has always been within the narrator—seen in her mentioning of the color blue throughout the story—the reader is left to wonder what has affected her erotic, and whether or not her suppressed erotic has led to her present addiction.

Throughout the narrative of our protagonists’ journey back towards addiction, the reader is presented multiple times with the color blue; the color appears when the narrator has a moment of introspection, insinuating that it represents a driving force within her. When read in the context of Lorde’s “Uses of the Erotic,” the blue may be considered as her inner, creative self, and the erotic within her. This creative self is seen in one of her episodes with Lenny, “Somewhere, there are blue rocks and they burn” (Braverman 99). This is only one instance where the color is used but, when reading the sentence closely, her use of the words “somewhere” and “burns” insinuate that she desires to be at a place other than where she is, and the burning suggests her ability to feel more than simply physical sensation. This points to the fact that the blue may represent creative self within her, reaching to be found. In addition, the glimpse into her childhood allows the reader to see the creative force within her; as soon as she

recognizes that she has a power, and becomes “entranced,” “the world is a soft blue” (Braverman 100). Her discovery of this power mentioned in childhood is reminiscent of Lorde’s comparison of the erotic to “a packet of white, uncolored margarine, with a tiny, intense pellet of yellow coloring perched like a topaz just inside the clear skin of the bag” (Lorde 5). Lorde compares the expansion of this pellet to the “erotic (...) kernel within (herself). When released from its constrained pellet, it flows through and colors (her) life with a kind of energy that heightens and sensitizes and strengthens all my experiences” (Lorde 6). In Lorde’s context, the narrator’s first glimpse of her inner strength, embodied in the color blue, seems to be the pure, unrestrained erotic within her that she recognizes flowing within her. While the narrator is capable of channeling the erotic, though it becomes a repressed force in her by the end of her narrative.

While the color blue does represent the erotic within her, we find that her eroticism has been suppressed by society as the symbol is mentioned whenever Lenny is present in the story. Upon his kiss, the narrator notes that “when she closed her eyes, everything was blue” (Braverman 105). She has finally given in to Lenny’s pleas of bodily submission—a factor that is seen constantly throughout the story, mainly in his urging to sleep together—and thus has given into his oppressive nature. Her entire worldview is blue after this kiss; he saturates her world, as the patriarchal society has done throughout her adult life. Another revealing scene is the last of the short story upon Lenny’s departure. As he leaves, “blue things” fly into her house, and the story ends with, “There is only this infected blue enormity elongating defiantly. The blue that knows you and where you live and it’s never going to forget” (Braverman 107). As the blue becomes permanently saturated after his departure, she is left with the conclusion that after her bottle of liquor is empty, “she would buy another” (Braverman 107). Lenny’s oppressive character not only brings the blue back into her present narrative—reminding her of the erotic—

but leaves a tainted version upon his departure. He, an embodiment of the oppressive and patriarchal society which she has experienced throughout her adult life, has left the blue “infected”, where it used to be “soft” and represent a “power” within her (Braverman 107, 100). Because of this infected blue, brought on by the oppressive patriarchal society, she is inevitably left with the return of her addiction. When considered, addiction is ultimately the antithesis of Lorde’s “erotic,” as addiction is a version of the pornographic, “sensation without feeling” while the erotic is about “our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings” (Lorde 4). Though there was at one time a pure version of the erotic within her, it has been infected by the oppressive patriarchal society over the course of her life, and she is left alone to battle her addiction.

Our protagonist of “Tall Tales from the Mekong Delta” contains much more than the capacity for mere sensation, but her erotic force described in Lorde’s “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” is ultimately suppressed and left inaccessible by the environment around her. She is left with a “plasticized” sensationalist version of the erotic, as it has been turned pornographic by the oppressive forces in her life (Lorde 4). Through glimpses of introspection into her past and a deeper understanding of the color blue, the reader sees that she has been left with an infected, sensationalist version of the once pure erotic within her. The suppressed version of her erotic ultimately leaves her vulnerable, detached, and submissive, bringing about her relapse into addiction.

Works Cited

Braverman, Kate. "Tall Tales from the Mekong Delta."

Lorde, Audre. *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power*. Kore Press, 1984.