Title
“What I need to see life through rose-colored glasses is a good fuck”: How a Performance of Ambivalent Sexuality Comes to Figure a Site of Metonymic Trangenerational Haunting in Maryse Conde’s Heremakhonon

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4rb3d9mf

Author
Bishop, Elizabeth

Publication Date
2010-04-01
BIO: Elizabeth Bishop is a PhD student in the History of Consciousness program at the University of California, Santa Cruz, with a background in philosophy and interdisciplinary humanities. She is currently working on post-colonial theory and literature, gender studies and critical race theory.

“What I need to see life through rose-colored glasses is a good fuck”: How a Performance of Ambivalent Sexuality Comes to Figure a Site of Metonymic Trangenerational Haunting in Maryse Conde’s *Heremakhonon*.

Maryse Conde’s novel, *Heremakhonon*, recounts the story of a woman who is haunted by shadows and traces of an irrecoverable past. The protagonist, Veronica travels to Africa, motivated by a desire to find her ancestors. She doesn’t find her ancestors, but instead displaces this desire elsewhere. This paper will be an attempt to map the oscillations of this desire from its painful origins through to its ultimately productive activity. I want to think about the ways in which a history of the persistent instrumentalization of black women’s bodies comes to be performed in this text through the strategic uses of a sexualized figure. Sexualized black women haunt the history of slavery and the African diaspora; these women have become condensed into a figure of transgenerational haunting which shifts metonymically throughout Conde’s novel. Some questions I am interested in are: How does desire function in this text and what are the significances of its oscillations? How can we go about thinking ambivalence and metonymy together in a literary discourse which engages the history of slavery in simultaneously comical and painful ways? How does a desire constituted by lack come to occupy a place of active, recuperative agency?

Before turning to Conde’s text, I want to introduce one of the critical frameworks that guide my analysis here, namely Abraham and Torok’s psychoanalytic theory of transgenerational haunting, reappropriated in a contemporary interdisciplinary study of the Korean diaspora. In her formative work, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy and the Forgotten War* (2007), Grace Cho performs a gendered critique of the *yanggongju*, or “Western princess,” which refers broadly to a Korean woman
who has sex with American servicemen stationed in Korea\(^1\). Cho’s aim is to excavate the remnants of trauma in order to elicit a narrative about the yanggongju as a figure of loss and grief\(^2\). She borrows from Abraham and Torok who theorize “transgenerational haunting” as trauma which permeates succeeding generations of families through practices of silence which attest to the impossibility of an erasure or a forgetting of this trauma (6): “Their clients’ preoccupation with silences in their families, or their acting out of traumas with which they had no direct experience, provided evidence of their being haunted by the unconscious of others. What is important to note here is that the haunting effect is produced not so much by the original trauma as by the fact of its being kept hidden. It is precisely within the gap in conscious knowledge about one’s family history that secrets turn into phantoms” (11). Here, trauma becomes performative as symptoms act out on the body\(^3\) producing the transgenerational haunting. Cho’s interdisciplinary analysis ends with a call for productive and creative reappropriations of these sites of silence. And it is here that I would like to refer the strategy deployed in Heremakbonon, as one such reappropriation. Conde’s strategy is to narrate sites of silences through sexualized descriptions of various bodies, which, I will argue resist the haunting exemplified through the silences mocked in the novel. I will further argue that this reappropriation in Heremakbonon takes the form of desire whose structure becomes animated metonymically. I will return to and elaborate the concept of metonymy in a later section.

---

1 “The woman who provides sexual labor for the U.S. military is at once a hypervisible object of loathing and desire for Koreans on the peninsula and a shadowy figure hidden in the collective psyche of the Korean diaspora…She is both the patriot who serves her country by keeping U.S. interests engaged and the tragic victim of U.S. imperialism who fans the flames of anti-American politics…She is a representation of over a million Korean women who have worked in prostitution for the U.S. military and of over 100,000 who have married American GIs. She is a representation of these real Korean women, and yet still a figure built out of layers of collective trauma and fantasy. The Korean woman who provides her sexual labor to Americans, whether through marriage or prostitution, paradoxically emerges as the ghostly figure of all that has been erased” (4).

2 “As an embodiment of the losses of Korea’s colonial and post-colonial history – the deracination from indigenous language and culture under Japanese imperialism, the loss of autonomy under U.S. military dominance since 1945, the decimation of the peninsula and its people during the Korean War, and the deferral of the war’s resolution – the yanggongju is the embodiment of the accumulation of often unacknowledged grief from these events” (5).

3 For more on performativity, and in particular, on the body, see Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*. 
Maryse Conde’s *Heremakhonon* is narrated by a Guadeloupian woman, Veronica Mercier, teaching philosophy in West Africa in the wake of decolonization amidst an authoritarian regime and the seething advent of a subsequent revolution. Because of a few affairs with men, Veronica has been forced to leave first Guadeloupe and then Paris for Africa. She goes to Africa in search of her ancestors. In the novel, *Heremakhonon* refers to the heavily guarded compound of Veronica’s lover, Ibrahima Sory, a highly-ranking member of the government, where Veronica and Sory frequently rendezvous. Veronica’s other friends and neighbors strongly disapprove of her relationship with Sory, whom they assert to be corrupt and evil. Towards the end of the novel, we learn that Sory is likely responsible for the death of her friend, Birame III, who was a student protester taken into custody earlier in the novel. Veronica becomes increasingly ambivalent about her relationship with Sory and about her reason for coming to Africa. This ambivalence is enacted through her hypersexuality, which I will return to in a moment.

The text is fraught with Veronica’s caustic introspections about her shared and divergent past with both the whites and the Africans around her. Upon her arrival in West Africa, Veronica reflects upon her childhood in Guadeloupe, where her family lived in the same town as a white family, of whom Veronica’s grandmother was an illegitimate daughter. They saw these whites in cathedral on Sundays: “I’m sure they didn’t know a drop of their [white] grandfather’s sperm had started our family line. We, on the other hand, had mounted and embalmed it. It was responsible for my mother’s relatively light skin and Aida’s straight nose. Its long lasting quality kept us from being as black as coal” (12). The silence surrounding this secret was shameful for her grandmother. But here, Veronica bluntly highlights the miscegenation at her origins, parodying and reappropriating this haunted secret. Further, Veronica speculates about what it might be like to have noble African ancestry, concluding, “Instead, I have in my family tree a white man’s sperm gone

---

4 The word *Heremakhonon* translates as "wait for happiness" in Malinke, the language spoken by the Malinke people of West Africa.
astray in some black woman’s womb. It didn’t seem to disgust the sailors on the slave ships and they had made a number of them pregnant by the time they reached the land. In fact, that’s how it all began. O, the prestige of the mulatto!” (16). The repetition of “sperm” centralizes the black female body as receptacle, while the mention of slave ships emphasizes the disavowed violence at the origin of her mulatto status, which she sarcastically refers to as prestigious. Her mocking tone actively resists this figure of black woman inseminated by a white man as a haunted silence. She resurrects this shameful past through flippant humor, and in these moments, is not haunted by it. In another instance, Veronica ties her particular sexualization to that of all female bodied persons, tying this illegitimacy to the transgenerational haunting of sperm and ship: “Saliou is in the yard. ‘My wife’s given birth. Another boy’…His voice is full of pride. You do need girls though in this humble world to create boys. I’m sure if I had a child, boy or girl, it would be the same. But I’ve never had a child. In any case, I’ll never have a child. Only little bastards” (19). The effect of this transgenerational haunting is that women are here reduced to reproductive conduits, yet Veronica reduces herself even further, again, with an ironic tone.

Yet at other times, Veronica is quite haunted by the silences in her ancestry: “What were we doing there [in Africa]? We must have lived, somehow. Eaten, slept, raised children? Was it so savage and horrible that it is better forgotten? Who can tell me? No one. Because nobody knows and everybody takes for granted what they’ve been told. Birame III, that’s mainly why I’m here. To try and find out what was before” (11). The text constantly wrestles with Veronica’s ambivalence about her past, about the silences that haunt her through the generations, and her oscillating longings and refusals as responses to this haunting.

Conde constructs a female protagonist inscribed by sexuality. In her colorful irony Veronica says: “What I need to see life through rose colored glasses is a good fuck” (219). Veronica is also overtly inscribed by the patriarchal relations that reify and naturalize her embodiment as intrinsically
reducible to her sexuality by the various men in the novel. For example, towards the beginning of
the narrative, she is reflecting on her father, the Mandingo\textsuperscript{5} marabout:\textsuperscript{6} “Left-wing intellectual.
Whore. These were the names a father calls his daughter. Anyway, I’m not the first in the family.
His half sister Paula was an easy lay” (9). Further on in this paragraph, Veronica compares her own
sexuality to that of her aunt’s, constructing herself as a whore, in accordance with her father’s
denigrations: “Instead of a balding, wheezing white with a limp prick, I’d have myself a rich young,
mulatto with permanent hard on” (ibid). Veronica repeatedly emphasizes her sexuality, both as it is
constructed for her, and how she herself creates it; she indulges in these sexualized stereotypes of
black women in order to draw them into absurdity through the active oscillations of her desire,
which leads me to a discussion of metonymy.

I deploy the term metonymy via a psychoanalytic discourse, which is both an extrapolation
of and radical departure from the strictly rhetorical sense. In the work of Jacques Lacan, metonymy
refers, very generally, to a displacement of desire, motivated by lack. Anthony Wilden summarizes
Lacan’s work on metonymy as follows: “Metonymy [operates] by displacement of the “real” object
of the subject’s desire onto something apparently insignificant” (242). Similarly, Susan Andrade
notes that “Lacan asserts that desire ‘is metonymy operating in the register of contiguity’ (175),
meaning that the desire for something is often displaced onto its metonymic equivalent, a part for a
whole (or vice versa)” (216). However, Jane Gallop has argued, quite effectively, that Lacan’s
formulation of metonymy is a phallic construct (and a distorted description of the movement of

\footnotesize

\textsuperscript{5} A Mandingo is a member of any of the various peoples inhabiting a large region of the upper Niger River valley of West Africa.

\textsuperscript{6} A marabout is a Moslem hermit or holy, particularly of North African origin.
desire as constituted by lack), where the metonymic displacement has atrophied and been fastened onto a singular structural model of part to whole.  

Susan Andrade notes that Conde engages, in order to problematize, stereotypes of black female sexuality.  Andrade asserts that Heremakhonon’s narrative is inscribed by metonymic displacements which involve shifting signifiers, keeping the locus of desire always in motion, in contrast to the Lacanian account of metonymy, as driven by lack, critiqued by Jane Gallop.  For example, Veronica’s desire for the Africa in this narrative is metonymically displaced onto Ibrahima Sory.  As Andrade notes, “The African of noble background, whom she often refers to as “my nigger with ancestors” represents a metonymic substitution for the entire continent (a part of the whole), his phallus filling in for the epistemic void, or the hole that is Caribbean history…As the phallus that (temporarily) fills in for the absence of history, Ibrahima Sory represents a gendered inversion of symbol of Mother Africa” (217-218).

In addition to Andrade’s analysis, I would like to also emphasize Veronica’s attempt to have Sory stand in metonymically for a reconciliation of her hybridized, double-consciousness.  While waiting at Heremakhonon for Sory to return, she reflects: “Merely sex?  Not for me.  In that case it would be so much easier.  Everyone knows you get tired of sex quickly.  It’s when the mind, the imagination starts to work.  I got it into my head that this man would reconcile my two selves.  And consequently, them.  And us.  That I would at last be at peace” (47).  Veronica, her own sexuality acting as metonymy for the history of slavery, as her desire for her ancestors shifts from a more generalized longing to a highly sexualized investment in Sory, seeks reprieve and cure in Sory, who again stands in as a metonymy for Africa, which has taken the place of Veronica’s desire for the

---

7 “Metonymy is a phallic conceit, the part standing for the whole, standing for the hole.  The substitution of the phallus (one sexual part) for the whole of sexuality is an example of metonymy, not what it should be (metonymy properly should have a varied definition with many sorts of relations) but what it stubbornly insists on being (continually misconstrued as the part of the whole)” (20).

8 Andrade specifically analyses Fanon’s criticism of Mayotte Capecia, a black woman who sleeps with white men, seeking “lactification” or a whitening of the black race.  He characterizes her and black women generally as whores (Fanon 8-10), while admitting further in the same text that he knows nothing about black women (180).
silenced origins of her ancestry at the site of the history of slavery. This previous sentence has been deliberately elliptical, in order to performatively illustrate the fluctuations of desire as they slip in and among Conde's narrative. Since both the history of slavery, as well as the idea of Africa, which Veronica desires but can never acquire insofar as it remains an idealization, are irretrievably inaccessible, the desire for each/both is perpetually deferred. Veronica is haunted by the memory of slavery, but this haunting takes the form of desire, in which Veronica takes an active role in sexually displacing, thereby resisting the initial haunting. The desire that I'm charting cannot be so precisely mapped, and must simply be followed. This is what I have tried to do in this paper.

In tracing transgenerational haunting through *Heremakbonon*, I have located a performative ambivalence which is reflected in the oscillating metonymic displacement of desire. Veronica’s genealogy, traced through slavery, reveals the silences at the site of her ancestor’s sexuality. Veronica’s introspections perform this ambivalence towards this transgenerational haunting largely through the use of sarcasm and parody. Herein lies the genius of Conde in this text: at the site of a figure of transgenerational haunting, active metonymic desire slips into this space of silence, reappropriating sexuality through a derisive, self-mocking humor. This site of transgenerational haunting through an active desire shifting metonymically in through the narrative of Conde’s novel has been mobilized through irony. So, in conclusion and as I depart from this project for now, I want to suggest that the twinge of self-mockery, which I’ve elicited from this text, can be a link more generally between trauma (as infliction) and desire (as reappropriation).
Works Cited


