

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

ON THE SHIFTING MARGINS OF RACIAL BOUNDARY: SEXUAL INTIMACY AND BORDER DYNAMICS IN DOLEN PERKINS-VALDEZ'S *WENCH*

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ABSTRACT

Under the perspective of dialectical relationship between slavery and mastery, this paper addresses the issue of intimacy across the color line, especially the dynamics of the racial border. The aim is to elaborate on the peculiarities of boundaries, on race and the peripheral vantage point of embattled interracial love in Perkins-Valdez's *Wench*. Sexuality and sexual relations are racialized in a white-supremacist order and involve the privileged position of whites (masters) over blacks (slaves). However, the novel constructs a momentary breakdown of the slave system through outlaw sexual intimacy meant to question white absolute domination in slavery. This paper shows interracial sexuality as a force that subverts and disrupts power relations, unsettles the oppressor/oppressed paradigm.

Key words: race, sexual intimacy, mutual recognition, border dynamics, freedom

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INTRODUCTION

Whites and blacks are confined in historical restrictions on interracial intimacy. Within the confines of racial hierarchy, this racialized sexuality functions as an antagonism between freedom and domination. Intimate connections across racial border are tolerated. There are prescriptions and proscriptions for sexual crossings. Interracial sexual intimacy between whites and blacks are exploitative or demeaning. In whites-blacks relationships, sex has been a key element of boundary or border. It has played a key role in racial positioning or politics, hegemonic ideology, etc. it is part of the system of power relations.

Boundaries are conceptual distinctions, objectified forms of social differences that separate and generate categories of people. Between white and black Americans, it is a process of identification

used by whites to achieve and maintain superiority over blacks. Here, boundaries translate into social exclusion and particularly racial segregation. They are essential medium through which people acquire status. This racial boundary is transgressed within the realm of sexual intimacy.

Sex serves as a tool for the dominant whites to maintain and extend their control over blacks. Paradoxically, it has been a complex factor that has been a source of the negation of the well-established boundary, since it has brought some dynamics in racial boundaries. Tender ties across the racial boundary constitute a paradox. Sex permits to illuminate racial similarities. It is an element that facilitates border-crossing. Therefore, drawing on deconstruction, I intend to read interracial intimacy against the grain of racial domination. In this perspective, I put in question racialized sexuality and

highlight racial boundary in the perspective of its dynamism.

Indeed, at the heart of Dolen Perkins' novel, interracial sexual intimacy is represented simultaneously as a tool for setting boundary, and a tool for crossing racial barriers. This paper carves the space, the emotional trajectory of love between whites and blacks, examining the permeability of racial barrier in the book. In exploring racial intimacy, the ultimate focus is to reveal that sex is a fundamental aspect of the human condition, and particularly a great source of vulnerability and a site for recognition.

If intimacy can be defined as an emotional as well as physical closeness between two human beings, does racial intimacy between white and black annihilate the conventional racial boundary? What are the limits of the extent of the individuals involved in interracial relationships in the novel? To what extent does sexual relationship between Drayle and Lizzie incur a place of transition, or blur the conditions and standards of miscegenation? How does sexual intimacy dissolve the institutionalized racial difference in Perkins-Valdez's work?

I shall first be concerned with the role of sexuality in the construction of racial border, showing essentially how sexuality appears as an axis of power, exploitation and inequality. Then, still looking into the contours of interracial relations, I shall articulate the border dynamics in the realm of master-slave sexual relations.

Racial Boundaries: the Sexual Objectification of the Slave Woman

Wench takes the reader into the sexual politics, the interstices of sex relations between whites and blacks during slavery. Slave women are presented in their primitive role of sexual objects for their masters. In this primordial role, they are perpetually the master's prey, the fulfillers of the masters' sexual needs. Sexual exploitation of the slave woman is deep-rooted in stereotypes and involves fantasies that surround and pin her down as a passionate and hyper sexual object. Within the structure of white domination, sexual exploitation of the black woman's body ranges essentially from a general pattern of the master's desire of domination

to acts of reproduction for economic gains. As Mamrak has observed, "There are a number of reasons why slave owners sexually abused their slaves: economic gains, desire for domination and control, and as a form of punishment." (1)

In *Wench*, sexuality between master and slave women or sex across the border of race is primarily determined by these traditional conceptions. According to the prevailing racial ideology, black women are viewed primarily as physical objects for white males' sexual desire. As property, the slave women's bodies belong to their masters and are forced into the role of sexual outlets. Within the alienating system of slavery, the slave women: Lizzie, Sweet, Reenie, or Mawu, whose story unfolds in the novel, experience sexual exploitation, a cultural norm which makes them objects for their masters' sexual lust, and sexual victims for whites' power, repression and profits.

The opening line of the book introduces them as sexual captives: "Six slaves sat in a triangle, three women, three men, the men half nestled in the sticky heat of thighs, straining their heads away from the pain of the tightly woven ropes." (3) This opening sentence describes the condition in which a group of slaves are being taken as commodities from a southern plantation in Tennessee. Tawawa, their final destination is a hotel, a vacation resort located in Cincinnati, Ohio, a northern state: "West of Columbus, east of Dayton, sixty-four miles north of Cincinnati, the resort cast together an unlikely association of white Southern planters, white Northerners, free coloreds, and slaves." (6) The harsh condition of the travel echoes the slave condition during the Atlantic voyage or the middle passage.

Traveling with the women are three slave men who play the role of pimps; their mission is to cover their masters' illicit sexual adventures, their illegitimate liaisons with the slave women. Actually, sexuality between masters and slaves stands on the racial threshold of the authorized. Sex with black women is frowned upon, that is why white masters find reasons to justify their taking the slave women with them instead of their wives. "This was the second summer at the vacation resort for the six slaves. Three of the Southern men brought their

slave women with them... None of the Southern men brought their wives." (6) While white women are preserved, protected from sexual debasement, for they belong to the dominant race, slave women play the role of concubines, fancy maids, or wenches, thus exposed to the masters' sexual abuse. Therefore, instead of their own and legitimate wives, white masters from southern states use their slave women as sexual captives and take them to Tawawa, the vacation resort in Ohio in order to fulfill their sexual lust. On those occasions, they do not hesitate to find fallacious reasons to justify their choice: "Drayle said he brought Lizzie to tend his cooking. Sweet's master said he brought her to mend his clothes. Reenie's man didn't offer a reason. Lizzie wondered what lie Tip, Mawu's master, had told the wife he left behind." (15)

Indeed, within the ideology of white supremacy, love between whites and blacks is officially forbidden. However, sexual intimacy with the slave woman is condoned and it only occurs in the form of violation, the debasement of the black body. The system of bondage in general denies the human status of slaves, and the black woman is particularly considered as a sexual commodity, a lascivious and primitive body or site of the white man's pleasure. In Tawawa hotel, the masters "took their slaves on the tables. Even Drayle, who was the most orderly of men, sometimes took her in odd places. No. Dishes didn't have a chance." (19)

"Sexuality," as Celine Parrenas Shimizu writes, "is the site of domination in slavery." (48) The white masters use sex to exercise dominance over slave women. Sexual relations are performed as absolute domination that renders slaves as property for their pleasure. The slave women occupy the status of sexual objects and function as victims of whites' sexual surrogates for their masters' wives. In *Wench*, the white master's performance of domination and control over the slave transpires in his sexual relations he imposes on the black woman. As the white man's private property, any black female in her prime, has to expect sex from her master, generally in form of rape. Lizzie was still young when she has been warned by Big Mama, Drayle's cook: "Big Mama had once told her she had to prepare for a life in which

she would be violated: *it hurt the first time, she'd said, but you get used to it.*" (93)

As slave women, they have little choice in the matter if their masters set out to take them. This violation is part of the cultural norm and every black woman has to integrate it as an inevitable fate and an important aspect of the white dominating system. Reenie's grandmother has gone through that experience: "Sir's daddy took my own mammy before she got her first blood. She give him three childrens before he died." (57)

Through intimate relations with black women in the form of rape, whites are denying equality with blacks and affirming their power. In this power relation, sex between master and slave involves a repressive nature and appears as a game, a freelance game whose goal is to satisfy the master's whims and ensure his control. In raping the slave, the master takes away her privacy and dignity. Thus, rape appears as an effective way to ensure that a slave comply with what the master's desires. What Mawu experiences with her master is an illustration. Since her younger age, she has been harassed and forced into having sex with Tip, after he beats her:

Mawu held him off longer than most. The first time he came for her she bit him and kicked him in the leg. The second time, she dropped an iron on his foot that broke a toe. After that, he brought her down to the barn for her first beating. When he told her to strip off her clothes, she refused. Even though he was smaller than the average man, she was even smaller. He took her afterwards while she was still sick in bed healing from the lashes. The more Mawu fought, the more determined he became to have her over and over again. He had her strapped to the bed on more than one occasion. (40)

Mastery includes the subjection of slaves to sexual abuse. Tip desires complete control and domination over Mawu, and engaging in sexual act with her is one way to assert his dominance and proclaim to the slave that he has control over her body. Regular rape on slave women reinforces racial distinctions and a weapon of racial terror. Aside from the

expression of power and domination, sexual assault is also used as a weapon by the master to punish non subordinate attitudes from slaves. It is the sentence that has been inflicted upon Mawu when Tip learned about her plan to escape:

Tip undid his pants and mounted Mawu from behind, pulled her up onto her knees. With the first thrust into her, Lizzie knew Mawu was still conscious. Mawu yelled like an animal, a shriek so cold and shrill that Lizzie knew that he had done something unnatural. And he had done it in front of all of them. (68)

On the whole, rape is used to maintain order and subjugate slave women within the boundaries of the color line, to maintain a hierarchical power structure. Raping the slave woman is a mode of domination and control, and as Bell Hooks argues in her reflections on race and sex, "Black women's bodies were the discursive terrain, the playing fields where racism and sexuality converged. Rape as both right and rite of the white male dominating group was a cultural norm." (*Yearning*, 57)

The sexual liaisons between white males and black females are usually performed in the form of rape: the white men rape of black women, confirming white dominance and privilege over the black body. As a matter of fact, sex is used as a means of establishing and ensuring a social control over blacks, a form of social control that reinforces the artificial color line. An obvious consequence of this power hierarchy is the psychology of sexism. From this psychology of sexism emerges a sexual color line, a tyrannical barrier that only whites can voluntarily transgress. By contrast, given the repressive nature of sexuality, the sexual union between a black man and a white woman is considered a racial aberration and a dire occurrence and is severely punished. In other words, the miscegenation law that exists to protect whites' privilege over blacks forbids sex between black men and white women. As a white woman, Mawu's grandmother has committed racial aberration and she had to leave the plantation to avoid the consequences: "Can you believe that? A white woman fooling with a slave man. She disappeared."(14) Mawu's grandmother could not

be tolerated because such a relationship downplays the white ideology of supremacy; and as Mawu commented, "I ain't never never heard no such thing." (14)

Though power or domination is the main motivation for the masters to engage in sexual relations with the slave women, *Wench* goes on to reveal other motivations. Beyond the fantasy of domination, one of the characteristics of the interracial intimacy is that it aims at slave reproduction for the master's economic gains. As Nathan Huggins argues,

Before every other consideration, the relationship between master and slave was an economic one, that between capitalist manager and labor. The ultimate end and rationale of the slave system was the enterprise work to the profit of the owner. Slaves were like land and stock, resources to be exploited and calculated in business judgments. (125-126)

The body of the slave woman is a fertile ground for the master's economic investment and growth. The white master relies on the slave woman's fertility in order to increase his profits. The slave is his legal property, and his offspring are of no exception. They therefore force reproduction on their slave women in their prime in order to increase the output, the profits. Thus, in addition to being an axis of white power, whites engage in sexual relations with slaves for the purpose of reproduction: slave breeding. Sexual intimacy for whites has an economic agenda. It aims at breeding slaves in order to increase the economic wealth of the master. In this economic dimension, sexual intimacy transforms the slave woman into a source of slave reproduction, to increase the master's stock. As the narrator reveals, "Of the eighteen children living in the slave quarters, more than a dozen were tan-colored." (39)

Some of these "tan-colored" or mixed-race children have already been sold. Mawu has "given Tip four children, but he'd sold three of them outright." (40) The white master exercises his authority on his property by deciding to sell or not to sell a child from his slave woman. When Sweet's baby was coming: "He [Sir: her master] was far from being a worried father. His celebration would be less

over a newborn child and more over a newly acquired piece of property. (73) All the other children Sweet has got by Sir are his exclusive property, and for him, there is no distinction to be made between those children and his other material belongings or property:

Wondering if he [Sir] cared that these were his children, too. Not just his property, but his own flesh and blood. But they also knew that for white men there was no such thing as separating the two. They were his children, yes. But they were also his property. And like most property they could be replaced. (185)

Slave children born out of the unions between the master and his slave woman do not have the status of human beings. This denial of humanity to the slave children is, as the novel reveals, what slave women fear the most: "This was the women's deepest fear. That a white man would feel his slave children could easily be replaced with new ones, as if it were an exchange at a dry goods store." (185) Following that negative attitude, Sweet has developed a sort of stoical indifference at the death of her child. When her daughter died, she grieved about her and yet told her friend: "No. This a good thing, in a way. I was worried about her. She was too pretty. Some old man was bound to start trying to mess with her. I didn't want her to end up like me. So now she gone to the Lord where she can be a true angel." (186) She refuses to mourn her child because death appears as liberatory instead.

Definitely, the slave woman is the master's sexual object, the property of her white master, and her only existence is justified by this alienated status. It is a status that reduces them into commodity, useful only as a body to be used by their masters. While complaining about her friends who are still reluctant to take actions for their liberation, Mawu gives us a very compelling account through her questions: "How can you stand being a slave? Don't you want to claim that arm? That leg? That breast?" (42) She further admits that, "She was just a slave like any other – beaten, used, and made to feel no different than a cow or a goat or a chicken." (42)

Sexual intimacy between whites and black women in *Wench* exposes the master's objectification and debasement of the slave woman. It is a socially constructed sexuality based on exploitation and it perpetuates the repressive system of slavery. Either in the cottages of Tawawa hotel, or back home on the plantations, the slave women are relegated to the lowest social order and have little, if any, claim to respect, or deference. They exist for their masters as sexual objects, routinely subjected to sexual exploitation. Yet, beyond the axis of power and negation, interracial intimacy can simultaneously disrupt and subvert the racial ideology of domination. I shall now try to capture the complex ways in which the dividing lines are blurred, transcended, and explore the implications of race crossing, which reveal the limits and contradictions of racial discourse.

Mitigating the Racial Boundary: Beyond the Axis of Power and Negation

Sex and sexual relations between masters and slaves is a complex matter and one of the most divisive issues in *Wench*. In these interracial relations, whites hold the position of the dominant, the masters while black females are all constrained to a status of objects of sexual exploitation. However, a closer look at these relations reveals a borderland of interactions, some intersectional dimensions that annihilate the clear cut barrier between the dominant and the dominated. Indeed, playing sometimes across the line of race, or undermining the racial boundary is the sexual relationship between Drayle and Lizzie.

Sexuality between Drayle and Lizzie challenges the racial boundaries and brings about social progress and mutual recognition. It is a relationship that goes beyond the axis of power and the negation of the humanity of the slave, affects Francesca, Drayle's wife and corrupts the whole system of domination as well. Sexual relations make them all victims of the racial barrier applied to interracial sexuality. Then, how does sexuality subvert the negation of the black body and allow some contours across the racial barrier?

When Drayle transgresses race boundary to have sex with Lizzie, he is exposing the latter's vulnerability. However, outside the normative

patterns of racial superiority, this sexual relation between Drayle and Lizzie develops into a mutual and affectionate relation, constituting therefore a step across the frontier. Threatening the existing social order are some aspects of their sexual intimacy that can be said to be located across the border of race, and more specifically between public actions or attitudes of the characters and their private thoughts or emotions. Because of the constraints of the existing social order, this mutual and affectionate love between Drayle and Lizzie is manifest not in public but in private, not in their outer world but in their inner world.

At Tawawa, Lizzie can experience the feeling of being a human being:

Inside the cottage, Lizzie felt human. She could lift her eyes and speak the English Drayle taught her. She could run her hands along the edges of things in the parlor – two chairs, a sofa, a wooden table, a tall oil lamp with milkglass base, a cast-iron stove – as if they were hers. And she could sit. (18)

The sexual intimacy between Drayle and Lizzie is preceded by courtship and it gradually grows into mutual affection. Lizzie is not prompt to reveal her love for Drayle when her friend Mawu questioned her: “You think you love him?” (16). Instead of an answer, Lizzie, who feels somewhat embarrassed because she is trapped into a forbidden love affair, remains silent, keeping the answer for herself. It is through a stream of consciousness that the narrator guides us into her actual feeling: “Lizzie felt the “course” rise in her throat, but stopped herself as she registered Mawu’s disapproving tone. She felt if she answered no, she would be betraying Drayle. If she answered yes, she would be betraying something else.” (16) Lizzie is unable to confess in public her love for Drayle because of the border line that excludes love between master and slave. It is a love that has to remain secret, private.

Though she does not utter it publicly because of the conventions of the white social order, and far from the opinion of the public, she loves Drayle, and her love for him is not an unrequited love. Drayle is white and Lizzie’s master. Therefore, his relations with Lizzie cannot be

revealed because of the social conventions that make Lizzie only a thing, a sexual object. Yet, against this assumption and beyond racial restrictions, his relation with Lizzie is preceded by courtship. Instead of raping Lizzie, Drayle has first courted her. “Drayle had told Lizzie countless times she was pretty, but she’d never really believed it about herself.” (10) Contrary to the experience of most of the other slave women, Drayle and Lizzie love each other, and this can be testified by secret deeds and attitudes for and toward each other.

Drayle and Lizzie experience and bear a mutual and affectionate love, and their love puts them into an abnormal zone. It is a zone which excludes brutality and coercion during sexual intercourses. This love expresses the dynamics of interracial intimacy. In the private sphere, against the white social order, Drayle does not consider Lizzie as a sexual object, though he is sometimes obliged to do so in public. Dynamism occurs between public and private, between what is socially prescribed and allowed and what is done but remains in the domain of secret. Lizzie is well aware of the existence of that abnormal zone. Drayle navigates between both public and private realms according to circumstances and Lizzie can understand him. The question she once asked him while they were alone is quite revealing about this double nature in Drayle: “Are you the kind of master everybody back home makes you out to be? Or are you something else?” (203) This double edge of in Drayle’s attitude has engendered a corresponding feeling in Lizzie that shifts from security to insecurity: “At night, she felt safe and certain, protected in his arms. In the day, she felt unsure of anything.” (42)

At the plantation in Tennessee, she occupies a different and privileged position among the other slaves:

The house slaves had accepted Lizzie as Drayle’s woman, and they now looked to her to convince him of favors. If someone was sick down in the quarters, they asked Lizzie to whisper the news to him so the person would be granted a reprieve. Another time, Lizzie convinced Drayle to let the slaves have extra rations of meat. Each

time Lizzie was able to redeem a request, the field slaves accepted her position a bit more. (105)

Lizzie's different positions allow her to cross the barrier of respect towards the master. For instance, when they are by themselves, she directly calls Drayle's name without using the etiquette "Master" or she addresses him using his first name: "'Why thank you, Nathan.' She called him by the name that only Fran used." (48) By being entitled to call the name of her master, she breaks the barrier of her exclusion and her inferiority. Drayle himself has encouraged her to do so: "He told her to call him Drayle, his last name only. Most of the slaves called him Master. He asked her to drop the title. At first she couldn't bring herself to do it. She felt if she dropped it he would take the final step and hurt her in the way she hoped he wouldn't." (93)

Contributing significantly to the blurring the racial hierarchy is the illegitimate mixed-race offspring that the illegal liaison between Drayle and Lizzie has engendered. To start with, Drayle does not force Lizzie into an object of reproduction as the institution of slavery authorizes him to do. He rather asks her the permission, her consent to bear his child: "I want you to have my child. Lizzie. Can you do that for me?" (103)

First of all, through the transgression of racial boundary, Drayle emerges into a honorable state of manhood, his manly capacity to procreate. It is out of his forbidden love with Lizzie that Drayle gains his reputation as a man. When Lizzie got impregnated by Drayle: Big Mama said: "He done finally done it. Nobody thought he could." (114) This has not been possible with Francesca, his white woman. Secondly, the first born baby, a boy looks exactly like Drayle and he is called after him: "Lizzie was glad she had named her son after him [Drayle]. Nathaniel Drayle, just like his daddy. Drayle Nathaniel." (21) And Drayle is very satisfied and happy for these reasons.

Raising up against the structure of white domination stands Drayle's dream of sending his son to school. "No,? for Nate. My son. He needs to get his lessons properly. When we return, I am going to get him a teacher to come to the house and give him his lessons. ... Now he needs a real education. After

that, I'm going to...(283) The dots in Drayle's statement are eloquent silences standing for the forbidden or the abnormal zone; that is what he intends to do which probably is not acceptable by the norms, the societal conventions. His plans for his son go over the limits or prescriptions concerning what is supposed to be a mere property.

Drayle secretly fathers his son and does not consider freeing him. Perhaps the reason lies in the fact that he will run the risk of exposing him to ill-treatment by an unknown master, and above all, he feels attached to him. He has another plan for him, a plan that assures him protection.

He is still my son, and so still my rightful property. But if he does well in school and doesn't get any notions in his head to run off, I'm going to bring him back south and give him his own plot of land to work. I imagine he could build himself a house and find him a woman to bear his children. (284)

Other intimate feelings followed with confessions of Drayle's recognition of Lizzie are replete in the novel. For instance, in the following passage, Drayle uses the children to consolidate his relation with Lizzie, and according to the narrator, Drayle "sometimes drowned her thoughts by saying: *don't you know how special you are? Don't you know I picked you out of all the slave women? Don't you know you're the first slave girl I've ever brought into my house? Don't you know you're the mother of my firstborn?*" (23)

It is a relation that transgresses the frontier of human and non-human. Their love has established between them a mutual understanding, and more importantly, Drayle's recognition of Lizzie. This recognition transpires in Drayle's emotion, his anxiety as expressed in the following: "But Lizzie understood the anger even if she hadn't expected it. She forgave him for it. He loved her, and he was afraid she would leave him, too. That was what made him so upset. Her leaving. His beloved Lizzie. The mother of his children." (66) For all these reasons, Lizzie has somewhat transgressed the border of exclusion, her slave status to supersede Francesca, Drayle's white woman. "Come on, Lizzie. Haven't I done right by you? Haven't I always

treated you like you were my very own wife?" (22) She is no more a slave like the other slaves. She has a special treatment made of favors and privileges. Simultaneously, this recognition begets a crisis in the white woman's social position.

A significant effect of the interracial intimacy is that it brings forth some subversion in the racial hierarchy that can be sensed at the level of the white woman, the traditional symbol of white supremacy. The relation between Drayle and Lizzie affects the status of the white woman and the black slave. In their traditional roles, the slave woman is relegated to an inferior status, without freedom. This social death makes her different and inferior to the white woman who is free.

In *Wench* however, while mediating the slave humanity by giving her a sense of social existence, sexual intimacy between the master and the slave resurrects the slave, acts to deconstruct the status of the white woman. Mutual and affectionate love between Drayle and Lizzie blurs the lines between the categories black and slave and white and free. Under the system of slavery, as Huggins writes, "unfree whites were unimaginable." (xv) Francesca's freedom, however, as a white woman becomes relative and even presumptive. For one thing, she suffers from lack of attention and love from Drayle, her husband who seems to ignore her into a depraved position by limiting her sexuality for pleasure, because, as Shimizu argues, "Within the sexual economy of slavery, white women are incompatible with any sexuality apart from reproduction." (50)

Another fact that weakens Francesca's status and position is her being barren. This incapacity to give birth downplays her position in her rivalry with Lizzie. As a result, Francesca privately rages about Lizzie, beating her jealousy in silence. As Lizzie gains favor from Drayle, Francesca is pushed away from the center to the margin. An example is the following: "Drayle did something that astounded his wife. Tired of sleeping on the storeroom floor with his new lover, he moved her into the guest bedroom across from his own. That was when Fran began to pinch Lizzie." (104) Sexual hierarchy overturns the racial hierarchy. Francesca is toppled from her pedestal, dispossessed of her

"superior" status, while Lizzie is granted some amount of social status. Instead of a mere concubine, Lizzie is granted the status of the proper woman, a surrogate wife.

Francesca feels humiliated and helpless, and as a result, she despises Lizzie as well as her children. Beyond hatred, she envies Lizzie:

"You know, I was always jealous of you."

"Jealous?"

"Of course. You never knew?"

"No, ma'am. I'm just a slave, Miss Fran, and an ugly one at that."

"So many things. I was jealous because you gave him children when I couldn't. Jealous he brought you to this summer resort without me. It was downright disrespectful." (269)

As the confession goes in this conversation, Francesca envies Lizzie who is considered less than a human being, according to racial hierarchy. Victim of Drayle's sexual intimacy with Lizzie, Francesca recognizes her position not above Lizzie, but below her. Her being white does not guarantee or ensure her dominance in the social order, her position of being superior to Lizzie. What all this reveals is that there is no absolute and clear line between slavery and freedom, a paradox of the American slavery. Instead of being confined in a degraded sexual role, Lizzie is granted a privileged position that perverts the southern social structure.

This master-slave dynamic in the relation between Drayle's wife and Lizzie leads to some new configurations of order and consciousness. The reversal in the positions of both women loosens the racial boundary, allowing Lizzie to feel human, and making problematic the question of race and identity. Outside the racial role, sex and the children make Lizzie a desiring subject, which contradicts the racist ideology. Her recognition, as well as the recognition of her children by Francesca, are factors which are placed above the racial border, and as a consequence, make Francesca a subordinate being compared to Lizzie. The paradox is Lizzie actually envies Francesca: "Lizzie looked at her and thought to herself that it was she who had envied Fran, not the other way around. It was she – Lizzie – who would have given anything at one point to be in

Fran's place, to have Fran's lustrous hair and skin and position." (271)

The sexual intimacy between Drayle and Lizzie is transformed into a kind of threshold moment, one with a transgressive power to undo the racial order, or defy slave relationships, for it operates outside the master's control. Sexual intimacy between Drayle and Lizzie introduces mutual recognition and liberatory potential born out of enslavement. For instance, Drayle also depends on Lizzie's capacity to procreate, her fertility to give birth in order to constitute himself as a man, the affirmation of his value in life. Interracial intimacy thus defiles the system of domination.

On the whole, within the alienating system of slavery, Perkins' novel attempts to bring on some mutual displacements, and the intimate relationship between Drayle and Lizzie is a fertile ground for confronting and working through their human vulnerabilities, and it is particularly a powerful context for Lizzie's personal development. Interracial intimacy makes Lizzie an object: because of her children she cannot and does not want to escape. She is held into bondage because of them. Yet, interracial intimacy makes her a subject who transforms herself by claiming entitlement. Lizzie holds the potential for revolt that can become a pursuit of freedom. She realizes that Drayle usurps the fruit of her ability to give birth, to usurp her children. She negotiates freedom for her children. Her decision to abort is an act of resistance and her self-recognition as subject. She risks her life in order to demise Drayle's mastery on her, and be recognized as a person. Through this act, she attains the truth of this recognition as an independent self-consciousness. This sense of self, the recognition of her own self-certainty is highlighted in the closing lines of the novel: the novel thus uses sex to frame the slave's access to freedom and to certify their humanity. This new identity threatens the structure of slavery.

At night, before she went to sleep in her cabin down in the quarters, she remembered Mawu's story and told herself that she was a god, a powerful god. Each and everyday, she reminded herself of this so that she wouldn't fall backward. She was

more than eyes, ears, lips, and thigh. She was a heart. She was a mind. (290)

The different aspects of her love with Drayle allow her to question the construction of whites' racial superiority and posit a new consciousness of herself. She realizes that her identity is not or should be based and limited to her body, a sexual object according to whites' fantasies. Beyond that representation, and agreeing with Mawu, she perceives herself as a human being endowed with a heart and mind. This new consciousness of her human condition portends her need to be recognized so, a new status of subject instead of object in her future relation with Drayle.

Conclusion

Wench shows interracial sexual relation as a conceptual limit of racial superiority by complicating and blurring racial subjection. The illicit sexual intimacy between Drayle and Lizzie is progressive and operates a tension between center and periphery, and eventually opens a crack in the border lines. This crack is a play space within which rigid boundaries are relaxed. It is this border dynamics or the less visible dimensions of racialized sexuality or the dialectic of sexual intimacy between master and slave, which has been at the core of the present reflection.

Contradictions and inconsistencies in the realm of sexual relationships between master and slave as dramatized in Dolen Perkins' novel are evidence of the transgression of traditional boundaries. In this paper, I have mainly focused on this border space that forges a new identity for the former black female as a sexual object for whites. Beyond the bounds of race, sexual intimacy generates a space, a dialectical space within which human vulnerabilities are likely to be revealed. The sexual act itself involves physical crossing of body boundaries, and it illuminates avenues for self-valuation or self-definition that can transform sexual and racial hierarchy.

Thus, the interracial intimacy blurs the artificial distinction between races. It turns into a transgression that threatens the very foundation of white supremacy. The borderland becomes vulnerable with a permeable boundary. This permeability underscores the precarious nature of

white supremacy in *Wench*. The relation between Drayle and Lizzie can be located in a borderland where race becomes obsolete as a significant social marker. Their relation undermines the constellation of inherited values and practices that constitute informal barriers to interracial intimacy. Their relationship troubles the boundary of race, makes it vulnerable or permeable. All this expresses the ineffable mysteries of love and sexual attraction that move denial and fantasy of the white to some recognition of the black woman.

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