

## God's Lioness and God's Negress: The Feminine and the Figure of the African-American in Plath

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Sylvia Plath's references to race and ethnicity, particularly to Judaism, are often discussed in the context of a poet's license to appropriate such material for personal usage. Her depictions of Blackness, however, remain under-discussed, as though the "nigger-eye" berries of her signature poem "Ariel" were those of a glaring elephant in the room (*Collected Poems* [CP] 239). With regard to the work of a poet who broke ground by transmuting such traditionally taboo material as private sexual relationships and the desire of a self for annihilation, it makes less sense at this point to argue about the poet's right to such material than to attempt an understanding of her artistic motivations. Rather than shying away from an example, such as her volatile reference to "nigger-eye berries" in the titular poem of her famous collection, one should attempt to link similar references throughout her work to clarify the intent of the poet's language and to discern what associative importance the motifs of African-American ethnicity held for her.

"Spain frightened you. Spain/where I felt at home. The African black edges to everything, frightened you. Your schooling had somehow neglected Spain... a Bobby-sox American," writes Hughes in *Birthday Letters* [BL] (39). This would seem to encapsulate what we know of Sylvia Plath's attitude toward Black Americans from reading her journals; Plath was the middle-class "Bobby-Sox American" and "academic" poet whose journal entries find the presence of Blacks a silent, somewhat threatening, edge to an existence sanctioned by America's dominant cultural narrative. In young adulthood, she wrote: "he opened the door and I stumbled blindly downstairs, past the little colored children, who called my name in the corrupted way children have of pronouncing things. Past Mary Lou, their mother, who stood there, a silent, dark presence" (*Unabridged Journals* [UBJ] 11).

Indeed, Blacks remain a "silent, dark presence" throughout Plath's diaries, flickering briefly and infrequently in the passing blurs of description with which she crammed her pages, and usually imbued with this sense of threat or exoticism. Surely the real world was not devoid of Blacks in positions other than spinach pickers, "negro chauffeurs," maids and "negresses in

fruity tropical colors," but this is how her reality as reflected in the journals exclusively perceives them (*UBJ* 11, 377, 497, 610). In Plath's journals, Blacks occupy positions of servitude or exotic otherness exactly as captured by Hughes in "You Hated Spain." This paves the way for the emotionally heightened hyperreality of *Ariel* which amplifies the condition of servitude into that of explicit slavery, as well as amplifying the associated sense of threat and otherness.

Rarely if ever in her journals does Plath's furiously scribbling pen endeavor to endow these figures with individuality; she writes instead how "all people of the Negro race look alike until you get to know them individually" (*UBJ* 14). Her rational intelligence perceives them as humans whom one is capable of getting to know individually, but her artistic impulse is to shape them into a symbolic device, the hazardous swam of outsiders who will take their fatal and mysterious vengeance: "Somewhere there will be the people that never mattered much in our scheme of things anyway. In India, perhaps, or Africa, they will rise" (*UBJ* 32). This perception reminds one of the swarming dark bees of Plath's late "The Arrival of the Bee Box" or "Wintering," both of which emphasize the bees' blackness, their otherness, and their implicit threat. When Plath's fully realized later aesthetic makes reference to an individual Black self, as in "Thalidomide," the Negro must appear "masked like a white" in order to carry out "its dark amputations...spidery, unsafe" (*CP* 252).

These entries also emphasize Africa's distance from her everyday world. During ruminations on American foreign policy Plath writes: "Hell, I'd sooner be a citizen of Africa than see America mashed and bloody and making a fool of herself. This country has a lot, but we're not always right and pure" (*UBJ* 46). Clearly, her hyperbolic statement views Africa as a last resort to the unfulfilled moral purity she desires from America. Later, in "The Rival," she will write: "No day is safe from news of you,/Walking about in Africa maybe, but thinking of me" (*CP* 166). Once again, Africa as a poetic device embodies extreme distance, abstraction, from her own life—and a spirit of menace resulting from the lack of refuge from its distant news.

Plath's use of race as a poetic device becomes, depending how one takes it, either less or more offensive when one realizes that she uses race as representative of inner emotional and imaginative states rather than in a literal sense—and she feels privileged to do so. In any case, depictions of race are very much distorted and re-ordered according to the logic of her interior universe.

The use of the adjective "Chinese" is one example, when in "Wintering" there is described a dark room that has "no light/ but the torch and its faint/ Chinese yellow on appalling objects" and in "Three Women": "Hieroglyphs...they paint such secrets in Arabic, Chinese!" (*CP* 218, 179). In both cases the word "Chinese" suggests inscrutability, or "foreignness" in the deepest sense, that of the poet's inability to properly perceive or comprehend, rather than acting as a literal reference to an ethnic group or that group's language. In a previous version of "Lady Lazarus," the speaker wonders if "I may be Japanese," and in "Fever 103" she writes "my head a moon/Of Japanese paper," in both cases referencing the ash of Hiroshima from which her renewed self will rise in transcendent Phoenix-like form (cited in Peel 192; *CP* 232). In Plath's work, race in particular works by a system of personal associative logic, so that races become a palette of "code words" for interior conditions.

A brief look at Plath's notorious appropriation of Jewish history is helpful to an understanding of her use of African-Americans. If, as Stephen Axelrod claims, Plath's introduction to "Daddy" "asserts that the poem concerns a young woman's paralyzing self-division, which she can only defeat through allegorical representation," it is helpful to explore what this self-division entails (Axelrod 52). Convincing arguments have been made to suggest that "Daddy" primarily concerns not the relationship between a Nazi and a half-Jew, but Plath's relationship to the male patriarchy ("Every woman adores a fascist") and Plath's condition as half belonging to this system, but only finding her voice when identifying with outsiders and thus beginning "to talk like a Jew" (*CP* 223). The German tongue of the Daddy who stands at the blackboard represents what stifled and paralyzed her about the male canon: "I could hardly speak" (*CP* 223). Axelrod makes the following observation concerning Plath's femininity in relation to her use of racial poetic conceits:

Her formal education had taught her to admire canonized authors who were white and male...Plath's personal library reflects this orientation. Her personal anthologies were edited by men...and included mostly male poets... virtually none of whom belonged to the ethnic groups with which she tended to identify herself, such as Jews, African-Americans, and Asians. Indeed, her library prepares us to understand Plath's identification with minority cultures. In the anthologies and on the book shelves, women also constituted a small and endangered minority. (36)

This persuasively presents the possibility that Plath had modeled her literary style on that of male writers but only found what she considered to be her true poetic voice with the influence of poets

like Anne Sexton, who dared write about "taboo" subject matter from a feminine perspective; and that Plath's identification with racial minorities and cultures of Others was deeply informed by her status as a woman. Late works like "Purdah," in which the Middle-Eastern setting is forcefully linked with female imprisonment, would seem to confirm this idea. The underlying outrage is that, as a song title written by John Lennon and Yoko Ono once forcefully put it, "Woman Is the Nigger of the World."

Although in *Ariel* the speaker often explicitly presents herself as white, and associates this color—or lack of color—with a notion of purity, as in the titular poem ("White Godiva, I unpeel") this is subject to a strange dichotomy, for whiteness in Plath is as often linked with annihilation as it is with perfection and purity. Even "Ariel"'s white Godiva ends in a "suicidal," if creative, dissolve of corporeal transformation. Plath's work resists any one interpretation, and indeed it is among her talents as a poet to make ostensibly simple words such as black and white bud with multiple meanings, but the whiteness-death trope is consistent from its appearances in her earlier work. In "Wuthering Heights" her speaker noted that "If I pay the roots of the heather/ too close attention, they will invite me/ to whiten my bones among them" (*CP* 167). "Finisterre" similarly finds the sea "whitened by the faces of the drowned" (*CP* 169). "Insomniac" discovers "a bonewhite light, like death, behind all things" (*CP* 163). The famous late poem "Edge" depicts children as "white serpents" in a scene of deadly perfection (*CP* 272). "Words" employs painterly emphasis in describing "a white skull,/Eaten by weedy greens" (*CP* 270). Plath often employs "pallor" in this sense, as in "Purdah": "And should the moon, my/ Indefatigable cousin/Rise, with her cancerous pallors" (*CP* 242). Needless to say, Plath's speakers rarely find comfort in the female figure of the cold white moon who is "white as a knuckle and terribly upset" ("The Moon and the Yew Tree") or "staring from her hood of bone" ("Edge") (*CP* 173, 273).

Yet even in "Edge" there is the presence of blackness: "her blacks crackle and drag" (*CP* 273). What is this blackness, and what associates it with death, or with the white moon, which is "used to this sort of thing" (*CP* 273)? How does this blackness relate to the blackness of bees in "Wintering," "black/mind against all that white," and in poems such as "The Arrival of The Bee Box" where metaphorical eye melts bees into actual Africans, "black on black, angrily clambering"(*CP* 218, 213)?

One important solution lies in Plath's use of a whiteness against which what is "colored" is memorably juxtaposed. Though Plath's work often depicts a white self as purified and superior, poems such as "In Plaster" present ambivalence about this superiority and perfection. "The white person is certainly the superior one," Plath's speaker asserts (*CP* 158). But "In Plaster" details this speaker's discomfort inside her perfect white self, and the speaker, who is "ugly and hairy," plots to get along without that flawless "saint" (*CP* 160). Similarly, the earlier "On the Plethora of Dryads," contrasts the "paragon" eye of a white saint with the speaker's fascination with "every pock and stain...eccentric knob and wart" (*CP* 67). Clearly, Plath's speakers often convey the sense that a paragon, saintly whiteness, indeed "perfection," does not allow for something uglier and truer to life that wants expression. She identifies with a canonized classical whiteness but feels torn by a need to express attitudes—perhaps unpleasant ones, decidedly out of the saint's repertoire—that will culminate in her identification with the figure of the Jew as opposed to that of the Aryan in "Daddy."

"Whiteness" is also seen not only as stifling to expression but even to the speaker's life force; this is often done by placing it in opposition to redness and blood. In "Tulips," whiteness contrasts with redness to illustrate the speaker's ambivalence toward life versus absolute peace and stillness ("the tulips are too excitable, it is winter here...their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds" (*CP* 161). Red is used to represent the poet's uncontrollable flood of life which drains her but is essential to poetic expression, as in "Kindness": "The blood jet is poetry,/ There is no stopping it" (*CP* 270). The blood does not stop in "Cut," either, whose theme is the flood of poetic inspiration the cut releases from the "dead white" of the skin flap. But if the skin is dead white, a stifling whiteness is also presented in the form of a bandage that makes an unsuccessful attempt to stanch this flow of blood: interestingly, this is depicted with the phrase: "The stain on your gauze/Ku Klux Klan/Babushka/Darkens...Dirty girl, Thumb stump" (*CP* 235). The choice of language is notable not only in the consistent theme of the taboo feminine ("dirty girl") versus saintly whiteness, but also in that the white bandage attempting to suppress the lifeblood is an oppressive Ku Klux Klan uniform—an explicit revelation of Plath's linking of blood and creativity, or taboo poetic truth, with the idea of racial "blackness."

All these associations seem to suggest that whiteness is as much subject to the poetic license of the poet's ordering imagination, as much a symbolic and separate role to be employed as shorthand for her ideas, as is blackness—merely another "code" by which Plath's speakers can

create a particular impression. In this light, Plath's use of blackness and other racial identifications loses some of its possible offensiveness.

As with whiteness, there is a traceable thread in Plath's work linking blackness with blood; but the blood is an aspect of blackness rather than working in opposition to it. In "Blackberrying" the speaker finds "blackberries/Big as the ball of my thumb, and dumb as eyes/Ebon in the hedges, fat/With blue-red juices... I had not asked for such a blood sisterhood; they must love me" (*CP* 168). Not only does the blood-thumb phrasing remind one of "Cut," but the depiction of black berries as black eyes will find a more potent expression in the "nigger-eye/berries" of "Ariel." Here, however, the speaker "had not asked for such a blood sisterhood." It is almost as if the poet anticipates the taboo feminine themes of the unconventional poetics in which she will finally express herself; and indeed, the voice of her final poetic fury, so unlike that of the poets of her admired canon, is something she "had not asked for" and comes somewhat unexpectedly. "They must love me," she writes in bemusement at finding unexpected associates in the berries (*CP* 168). Here the blackness is "dumb," as in her journals a "silent, dark presence," but seems inextricable from the "taboo" poetic aesthetic of blood, truth and feminine rage she is developing for herself. It links not only with her conscious minority status as a woman but as an artist—specifically an artist whose vision encompasses the "ugly and hairy" in life and not only that which is conventionally beautiful.

When the speaker of Plath's signature "Ariel" asserts that "nigger-eye/Berries cast dark/Hooks--/Black sweet blood mouthfuls,/Shadows," one finds the conceit of blackness/blood in its ultimate compression in the same loaded racial term employed by John Lennon and Yoko Ono's provocative "Woman Is the Nigger of the World" (*CP* 239). The term is deliberately chosen for its compressed embodiment of oppression, as opposed to a gentler word, in the manner that Plath commonly uses code words for their forceful metonymy. Yet if the berries are attempting to cast hooks at Plath's purifying rider, the whitening Godiva, to in some way stop or injure her, they are also black "mouthfuls" she finds "sweet," as if to link this conception of blackness with poetry—the mouthfuls of poetic lifeblood she discovered in her final months. "I just like good mouthfuls of sound which have meaning," Plath would tell an interviewer (cited in Kenner 41). Something about this threatening or injurious blackness is also sweet, alluring, as in "The Arrival of the Bee Box," and "Ariel" concludes with the speaker's propulsion into the redness with which blackness

has been linked, and whose dangerous but liberating life force concludes many of the *Ariel* poems with such power.

"The box is locked, it is dangerous./ I have to live with it overnight/and I can't keep away from it," says the speaker of "The Arrival of the Bee Box" (*CP* 212). The box of bees described as miniature Africans ("black on black, angrily clambering") on one level must concern her poetic inspiration, in which she finds liberation with a self-destructive sting, linked as it is with repressed rage and the apparition of a father once described as "God of the Bees" (*BL* 150). Evidence for this can be found in the description of the bee box, particularly the sound made by the bees ("unintelligible syllables" and "furious Latin") and the speaker's sense of ownership which endows her with a godlike status ("I ordered this... I am the owner... I am simply a Caesar... tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free" (*CP* 213).

In Plath's poetry, explicit use of racialized "blackness" is a device to depict the struggle for power; the speaker's own power or someone else's power over her is expressed in contrast to the powerlessness of figures of Blackness. In "The Jailer," which finds the speaker at the mercy of a patriarchal presence, tortured and captive, she writes: "He has been burning me with cigarettes, /Pretending I am a negress with pink paws. /I am myself. That is not enough" (*CP* 226). Here the reference enhances the sense of powerlessness the speaker experiences at the hands of her male captor, but also shows Plath's (stereo)typical use of the negress as a symbol for the exotic: I am not exotic enough: he must pretend I am something more exotic. The reference recalls the journal entry with "negresses in fruity tropical colors" (*UBJ* 610) while the distasteful reference to "pink paws" utilizes stereotyped imagery of blackness, particularly feminine blackness, as not only exotic but primitive, animal, sensual. Yet the pink paws also emphasize vulnerability and delicacy. Plath's use of pink is not as often discussed as the reds, blacks and whites which inform her poetic palette with such memorable force; the early poem "Sow" depicts "pink teats" at which little piglets suckle; the late "Balloons" speaks of an infant's "funny pink world he might eat," a fragile world glimpsed through a balloon which then pops (*CP* 61, 272). Only in Paradise can such a world find unassailable security: "roses, kisses, cherubim,/Whatever these pink things mean...to Paradise" (*CP* 232). Therefore a sense of feminine vulnerability is inextricable from the use of blackface imagery resulting from a minority's sense of powerlessness in "The Jailer."

Though readers might be tempted to seek the racial reference in Plath's every use of "blackness," this would be a disservice to the multiple levels of meaning in Plath, as well as curtailing to a questionable degree the artist's license to employ descriptions without the burden of automatic connotation. In "Daddy," for example, it seems clear that the "black man who/ bit my pretty red heart in two" is black with devilry and evil as opposed to racial blackness. However, because Plath's technique relies so heavily on connotations, many references are questionable in this regard, as in "Wintering": [The bees] ball in a mass,/Black/Mind against all that white" (*CP* 218). Emphasizing blackness with stark enjambment, Plath in effect italicizes it with a significance that is not entirely clear. Is it simply visual? Is it wryly theological, implying a "black mass"? She does tell the reader that "the bees are all women," perhaps presenting another pairing of blackness with the disempowered status of the feminine. Yet earlier stanzas reveal a room of indeterminate menace where "the black bunched in there like a bat, no light/ but the torch and its faint/ Chinese yellow on appalling objects," and "this is the room I have never been in./ This is the room I could never breathe in" (*CP* 218). The ethnic minority reference, the link to bees (where the blackness bunches like bees that ball in a mass), in addition to the room as specifically "at the heart of the house" suggest that these references signify the state of mind, threatening, dark, yet liberating, which the poet had not entered before—the heart of her subject matter. "The room I have never been in, could never breathe in" is confronted at last, yielding its dangers in the form of swarming female bees, their darkness bristling against the restrictive symbolic whiteness that had stifled her, a whiteness that could also be a visual reference for the white of the page ("black/Mind against all that white"). Indeed these swarming women "have got rid of the men,/The blunt, clumsy stumblers, the boors" and now "they taste the spring" (*CP* 219).

While Plath's use of Jewishness has clearer links to her conceptions of the supernatural, linked in turn with her conception of the ability to create a poetic "magic" —her journals refer to a "witchy Jewess" and "Daddy" refers to a "gipsy ancestress" trafficking in Tarot cards and "weird luck" —it remains uncertain to what extent the poet associates her minority status with her empowerment through art. Hughes's "You Hated Spain" references the voodoo qualities of "the juju land behind your African lips," but this is Hughes's association, not Plath's (*UBJ* 608, *CP* 223, *BL* 39). It remains mysterious whether the blacks that "crackle and drag" in "Edge" refer to female creative power because they belong to a moon that is "used to this sort of thing" and

therefore unfazed at the tableau the "perfected" dead woman has accomplished. This explanation seems unlikely, as Plath's speakers typically find the moon to be a symbolic representation of death or barrenness; but death and creative empowerment are not unrelated in Plath's work (the signature "Ariel" being only one example). But blackness too is associated with death, from the vampiric "Daddy" figure to the black telephones in "The Munich Mannequins" "digesting voicelessness" (*CP* 263).

Blackness, if anything, seems generally linked with Plath's sense of her minority status, an oppressed sense of "voicelessness" and ensuing retribution, as well as with Thanatos; and from the berry-hooks cast in "Ariel" to the swarms of Plath's Bee Sequence, blackness always retains its sense of menace.

Finally, the moon in "Edge" may watch unfazed because she is used as feminine helplessness, Medean drive for retribution, the feminine death-drive—perhaps all three. It is impossible to say once and for all what Plath intends by certain recurring associations that at times literally bleed into one another in her poems. One is left like Plath's caricature of Doyle's Sherlock Holmes in "The Detective": "There is only the moon, embalmed in phosphorus./There is only a crow in a tree. Make notes" (*CP* 208). Ambiguity, particularly with such "hot" subject-matter as Plath's, is the pivotal element that compels our constant re-analysis and debate concerning the often terrifying recognizable world of her greatest poetry.

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