Intersticios on the Body: Reading Racialized Bodies Within Sexual Violences

Though shapes of routine violence against women have always existed, the politicization of the racialized feminine body has emerged in literary criticism in recent decades, highlighting the striking juxtaposition between the treatment of acts of violence against the gendered bodies of women of color and of white women. Kimberlé Crenshaw's essay, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color" draws upon Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality to explore how interlocking systems of oppression serve to further devalue women of color, casting them to the invisible or unseen "margins" of society. Within frameworks of sexual violence, these dominant conceptualizations of rape reproduce a fixed conduct towards women of color, upholding colonial attitudes of racial hierachy that undermine their lived experience as significant. Similarly, literary critic and author Myriam Gurba explores the interplay between race, sexuality, class, and cultural stigmas that interact within gendered institutions of violence that spans throughout her body of work. This intersectional experience of violence is explored most notably in *Creep: Accusations and Confessions*, an essay collection that deconstructs the violence that permeates the sociological stratosphere unscathed, focalizing this violence through a racialized lens of Chicana/Latina livelihood, interweaving her own experiences with other cultural representations of racialized sexual violence. Through Gurba's stylistic usage of *testimonio*, throughout *Creep*, a fundamental solidarity is formed of the personal and the political– women of color's experiences of sexual violence can thus be understood as manifestations of colonial practice and racial hegemony through this woven narrative.

Gurba's work can be best interpreted through the framework of *los intersticios*, a

perceptual space from which identity is formed at the intersectionals of social relationality. This term was coined by feminist and cultural scholar Gloria Anzaldúa in her autobiographical book, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, expanding on frameworks in which the woman of color navigates the world: "The woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of her self…[she is] caught in between *los intersticios*, the spaces between the different worlds she inhabits" (Anzaldúa 20). The *intersticios* can be seen as a framework to view Crenshaw's "margins" through a Chicané lens, highlighting the spaces that women of color become steamrolled into, invisibilized in discourses surrounding both gender and race. Rather than occupying centrality in both spaces, the discourses surrounding these converging issues puts men of color and white women at the forefront, ignoring "intragroup differences" that shape the violence perpetuated against women of color (Crenshaw 1242). Rather than a source of support and recourse, these liminal spaces are subverted into a space of imperceptibility by society and evasion of the figurative "veiling" of society's most disempowered. Crenshaw asserts that the very structure of antiracist and feminist discourses are non-inclusive due the basis of intersectionality requiring an interdependence of both social dimensions: "Because of their intersectional identity as both women *and* of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one *or* the other, women of color are marginalized within both" (1244). Crenshaw clarifies that this is not to assert that acts of violence against women of color may only be viewed through frameworks of race and gender, but rather how these are the most fundamental aspects of violences inflicted upon them.

Disparities against raped women of color and raped white women can be attributed to the good woman/bad woman dichotomy that have been historically entrenched within sexualized notions of race (Crenshaw 1266). Crenshaw asserts that sexualized images of women,

specifically Black women, dates back to the beginnings of settler colonialism in the 15th century. Black women have typically been perceived as inherently sexual, gratifying, and, during the Antebellum period, seductresses of their slave masters. This contrasts heavily against the purity culture that permeates American culture, creating an intersecting view of "sexualized images" of rape that discern the "madonnas from the whores," or the women of color from white women who are often associated with both racial and sexual purity (Crenshaw 1271). The racial feminine body becomes marked with meaning on both sides of the spectrum, etching value onto the physical body through these racial narratives that imbue believability factors onto victims of sexual violence. The "good" or the white woman is seen as sexually pure, usually in good social standing, and is often ascribed to young white women. Conversely, the "bad" woman, or the woman of color, is portrayed as more sexual, more "typical" sexual beings who are often blamed for violences committed against them– early common law notions found that "a woman alleging rape must be able to show that she resisted to the utmost in order to prove she was raped, rather than seduced"— again, upholding colonial attitudes towards sexualized racial bodies (Crenshaw 1266).

Gurba highlights similar racial disparities in "*Pendeja*, You Ain't Steinbeck" through the haunting *testimonio*[1] of rape and murder victim Sophia Torres, who was attacked by the same perpetrator as Gurba[2]. Imperialistic notions posit that America is a "safe haven" for those fleeing violence in their home countries, offering a place of asylum and sanctuary; this, however, is not reserved for feminine bodies of color: "[Sophia's ghost is always with me…and she has

[1] The Latin American term "*testimonio"* here references a "witness account" that embodies a narrative research technique rooted in Latin American history that takes on a confessional style in the first-person perspective.[2] Gurba also references Sophia Torres and the attack perpetrated by Tommy Martinez Jr. in her true crime memoir, *Mean*. More specific references to Torres can be found in "Wisdom", "Spring Semester 1998". and "Strawberry Picker". Aspects of class in association with gender and race is explored most throroughout though Torres, who was unhoused at the time of her murder.

words…*Mexicanas get raped in the USA too. You know better, you know how dangerous the United States of America is, and you still chose to frame this place as a sanctuary. It's not*" (Gurba 259). Whereas Torres received justice for the acts committed against her, such is not often the case for women of color, especially migrant women of color. Statistics cite that white women receive justice for the crimes committed onto them by a wide margin in comparison to women of color: men convicted of raping a Black women had an average sentence of two years; for a Latina woman, five years; for a white woman, ten years (Crenshaw 1269). This does not include the perspective of the undocumented or migrant woman, who are very often too afraid to come forward for risk of being deported or revoked of their legal status. In the case of Torres, not even she was granted believeability in her rape; touching briefly on archives disccussed in Gurba's memoir, *Mean*, Gurba found that the defense attorney on her case suggested that there was no evidence to substantiate that the DNA evidence of acts of sexual were not consensual, instead asserting that perhaps she had sought "comfort" from her emotional turmoil in the arns of Tommy Martinez Jr., her perpetrator. This post-mortem accusation is stark in comparison to cases in which the victim of rape is white, and her own murder and rape become delegitimized as a result of the racialized sexualization perpetrated by the defense attorney.

Extending on the imperialistic dichotomy of women of color and white women, Gurba brings forth the typical representation of gendered based violence in "Slimed", where she deconstructs the racial undertones of Alice Sebold's memoir, *Lucky*. In an attempt to resonate with the subject matter of being raped, Gurba instead discovered the contrasts of how Sebold's rape case was perceived against her own rape experience, which went largely unspoken and unbelieved. In *Lucky*, Sebold implicitly suggests the differentiation between her own rape and those who are "expected" to be victims of rape, reinforcing racial hierarchal belief within the

"good woman/bad woman" perception:

> …I was a virgin. He was a stranger. It had happened outside. It was night. I wore loose clothes and could not be proven to have behaved provocatively. There were no drugs or alcohol in my system. I had no former involvement with the police of any kind, not even a traffic ticket. He was black and I was white. There was an obvious physical struggle. I had been injured internally–stitches had to be taken. I was young and a student at a private university that brought revenue to the city. He had a record and had done time. (Gurba 223)

This assertion of the pure versus the sexual pervades underneath the surface of Sebold's contrasts, creating clear distinctions against not only the Black man that had raped her, but the victims of sexual violence that do not share the same physical and social attributes as her– a wealthy, white, clean-cut university student. To her, these contrasts serve as a reminder that these things *shouldn't* happen to women like her, and that it's almost unbelievable that it had, whereas with the "provocative, inebriated" woman, it is expected and therefore not as valued. Recounting her very first experiences of sexual violence, Gurba's description of herself seems to fall perfectly in line with the contrasted image Sebold postulates above, returning to a stylistic usage of *testimonio* to convey the events of her first experience of rape. Gurba writes, "I was wearing leopard-print platform shoes, a black velvet miniskirt, and a gauzy black blouse when I got grabbed…I had "lost my virginity" at a house party where I [drunk] so much that I couldn't walk…[a boy] carried me to a bathroom [and] did what he wanted" (Gurba 223). Returning to the madonna/whore dichotomy, Gurba's behavior as a young woman is vastly differentiating

from that of Sebold; while both of their bodies are equally as deserving of respect, only one is seen as "valued" and "sacred". Gurba notes a similar perception at the hands of law enforcement— whilst Sebold is named a "perfect witness" by the court despite falsely identifying her perpetrator and contributing to his conviction and subsequent imprisonment, Gurba is sexually assaulted once more at the hands of a retired male detective following her rape during an intership with District Attorney's office in San Francisco. She distrusts the system even more than prior, whereas Sebold's trust in the justice system is solid even upon the acquittal of her accused false rapist, Anthony Broadwater. She maintains her "faith" in a system that seems to serve her, and women like her. In the case of women like Gurba, there is no sense of value on the racialized body, and therefore no measure of justice for them. Gurba references these racial hierarchies expanded on Crenshaw's article, identifying the clear distinctions between the white rape victim and the rape victim of color: "Sebold was a very good rape victim. Apparently, I wasn't… I imagine her gazing down from the top of this implied hierarchy, at the rest of us" (Gurba 223). Sebold takes on the image of the "believable"[3]rape victim, upholding the oppressive systems of gender that she claims to challenge.

As a result of the intersecting dimensionalities of Black and Latina women, a unique vulnerability is cast within the scope of sexual violences, reinforcing not only the silencing of women of color but the violent institutions that serve to diminish and devalue feminine bodies of color. Caught in *los intersticios* of her own identities, she is unable to reconcile with the violence made against her in neither antiracist nor antirape discourse. Both Gurba and Crenshaw highlight

[3] Common patriarchal thought often dictates believeability of rape victims on attributes of purity, often associated with racial dimensions perpetuated against Black and Latina women. See "Mapping the Margins: Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color" (1271).

the significance of intersectionality through the specific experiences of women of color, all of

which illuminate the multifaceted ways in which colonial aspects of race and gender permeate the sociological stratosphere. In order to shift tides against limiting perspectives of sexual victimhood, it is clear that rape and sexual violence reforms must be amended on the basis on intersectional theory and resist against the negative *intersticios* created on the body, subverting this liminal space into a interstice of resistance.

Works Cited

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