

Carter is So Handsome

Dr. Stephen Hartman

Prologue

Struggles that register in gender, sexuality, race and class coax conflict that depicts the psyche's recursive entanglement with society's habitus out of the sanctuary of the unconscious and into plain sight. At these intersectional nodes, people bricolage a felt sense of the body and its realms of pleasure using a lexicon of patterned and novel objects that provide *each one among Us* with an array of genders and sexualities to move into and to embody. Race is sculpted with considerably less elasticity.

Gender and sexuality adapt to *what is possible and permissible* (Dimen, 1984) leaning upon the coherence that identity provides – often by bolstering one register while diminishing the other. As psychoanalytic attention shifts from gender's psychobiology to its intersectional geography (Harris, 2019), analysis charts how experiences particular to sexuality, gender, race and class compete for airtime in a psychosocial mash-up. Paradoxically, *identity* (a conduit to coherence) becomes traumatic when intersecting vectors of experience divide into ranked singularities as per *the Other's* command. This essay narrates this struggle without grounding observation in a developmental theory or analytic technique so as to champion complexity and resist taxonomy.

Carter is so handsome

Carter is so handsome that it is sometimes hard to meet his stare without tracing the line from his ample curls to his fulsome lips which – even when he scowls, which he often does, beckon an embrace. Some would call him 'pretty' though he is brown and swarthy and sculpted with a lean ribboned torso and thighs like a Navy Seal. Women want to top him. Men assume he is gay. Lickety-split, gender and sexuality take turns orienting the object to fit the requirements of the gaze.

Carter can't resist others' desire for him whatever its form and, at the same time, he is blindsided by desire's fine lines because – while Carter's admirers are taking in his body and assigning him gender – while they are taking in his gender and assigning him sexuality – Carter trades in gender and sexuality without subscription. Carter is not intentionally 'metro-sexual' or decidedly 'gender queer', he's Carter. He looks like sex, not *sexuality*. Wryly and with complicity, Carter trans-genders intimacy and everyone gets to play with him. Think Prince. Think Jake Gyllenhaal striking a Grace Jones pose. Imagine Barack Obama restyled in Galliano.

If only! Ideology commands what Carter refuses – that the confines of desire and the hail of normativity recruit sexuality and gender as unwitting accomplices. When gender pushes the envelope too far and fails to tell an obvious story, 'deficits' are named. Gender calls upon sexuality to shore up the obvious (a pretty man like Carter must be gay) whereupon gender ponies-up (a 'gay-ish' man like Carter is obviously femme). This bait and switch appears so obvious that no one notices how femininity shoulders the burden of masculinity's collapse.

Carter finds himself in sticky situations when people who desire him demand his gender take shape. Then Carter goes into freefall. He scowls. He fades from view. He licks his wounds: racial wounds; class wounds; all sorts of wounds that are named as 'gender' or 'sexuality' to appease desire's economy. In his depersonalized state, Carter appears to himself a Little black boy hiding from tormentors in a vacant crack den in his mind^[1]. Carter guards that liminal sector of his psyche where

the unspeakable goes unnamed. He defies cartography. He glowers through a sexy mask. Carter has taken to showing up at the hospital where he teaches in generic scrubs because one winter morning when he ran a meeting sporting an embroidered Valentino smock, all hell broke loose.

Carter is so un-obvious

Classical psychoanalysis leaned upon gender's seemingly obvious biology to render a convenient taxonomy of psychic positions with which to interpret the fallout from psychic bisexuality and sculpt a sovereign heterosexuality. Flash forward, and this meta-level devaluing of gender's phenomenology allows the anatomical gendering of *sex* to sculpt *sexuality* socially – all the while essentializing *infantile sexuality* (Laplanche (2011)). An unconscious instantiated by an autonomous *infantile sexual* secures the analyst's footing in the white-privileged realm of the un-obvious but dooms gender and race to endure the blackness-of-being obvious (Mbembe, 2017).

When gender is fluid and race is mixed, there is a lot to take into account – which is inconvenient if you are face to face with a not-so intimate whose multiplicity disregulates you. So no surprise Carter's ex demands he puff up like Roger Ramjet. Carter has the beef, but he won't chorizo for anyone.

Perhaps gender and sexuality are not so dichotomous as *halal* and *haram*? Nor race an *après coup* in unconscious architecture to a *sexuel* that is alone *Other* to itself? Intersecting messages from the Other launch meaning in a recursive chain of transformations: the enigmas of desire seeking a place in the mind – which requires desire find a place in the Other's mind – that finds it in a culture – so that desire can rest in the body and be invested with meaning. In this recursive flow, sexuality, gender and race elaborate one another. But when gender ventures too far into transitional space, when the order of things gets slippy, Sexuality steps in to level the playing field and reinforce the obvious.

Carter is so lucky

Carter is so lucky. His refugee parents named him after an American president. Not the failed president that Jimmy Carter was hailed in perpetuity to be by the Marlboro Man who grabbed his mantle, but a principled man who bore humiliation and built habitats for humanity.

Gruesome things happened in the country that Carter's parents fled that no child should have to bear, and so those things are rarely mentioned. Carter inherited an instinct for survival. He knew when to shut up, when to run and when to stand his ground. He watched his parents seethe often enough to become suspicious of their evangelical faith. There were incidents. Commanded to confess sins, adolescent Carter swung at the preacher. He became violent but he had manned-up so the incident was quickly forgotten. Carter wins scholarships. He travels. He invests in family and friends and lovers. He lives a golden brown life: self-aware and other-concerned and buoyant and carefree.

Carter is so menacing

Carter is so menacing that his eyes go black. Giant holes fill wan sockets. His skin goes a sickly grey blue. He slumps on my couch and I find myself yearning for his vitality to return. I can still trace the beauty of his jawline despite the scowl.

First came the breakup with the woman who named his 'gender deficit'; later, the incident with the smock. Carter is furious that he is commanded to be obvious. 'Man-up' they say – which threatens Carter's gender less than it does his ability to play. Carter sharpens his tongue on silence. 'Bring it on!' he commands in a voice that only he can hear. He is ready to pop, ready to swing. 'Don't do it', I whisper in the silence. 'You fucking bet I'll do it!' he tells me without speaking. I nod. I register. I hold

the place between killing and being killed that his parents long ago fled but that Carter now inhabits.

Carter is so buoyant

Carter is so buoyant in the dressing room. The sales clerks love him. A Commes Des Garçons man skirt, absolutely! Carter can't afford it, but the salesmen make it happen because dressing Carter in a three-way mirror is like shooting hoops with Jesus in a djellaba.

Carter is in a bar in Istanbul. An underground speakeasy where people like Carter's parents once danced the night away while tanks patrolled the street above. Carter wears today's shopping bonanza: a sequin blazer with a lapel so curvy, so sensual, even Liberace would demure because it's so girly-man that it takes a man's-man to pull it off. Carter can't believe his fortune: a Little brown boy from the ghetto in a tableau vivant from Pamuk's *Museum of Innocence*.

Trump's coronation is happening thousands of miles away and Carter feels lucky not to be there to witness the horror. His friends retreat to a corner table, but Carter wants to dance. He is dancing by the bar when a man tugs on his sleeve. Carter spins around, whoa! He hadn't realized how much he'd had to drink. Right beside him is a white American man sitting awkwardly at a rickety cocktail table with his blanched wife. 'You're one of them San Francisco fags aren't ya?' scoffs the ham-handed lowan. 'Huh?' Carter asks wondering 'what the hell?' when the man stands up and barks, 'why can't you people just be normal?'

Carter doesn't know what overcomes him. His eyes go black. He lashes out: 'from the Mission!' He grabs the Republican by the back of the head and smashes his fat face into the bar. Carter loses his balance and when he comes to, he is a bloody mess on the sidewalk.

His friends find him. The solution: more *arak!* Giddy, they search for an infamously seedy bar. As they approach, a limo screeches to a halt. A flotilla of bodyguards pile out followed by a solid man who appears to be a Colombian narco-terrorist and a beanpole of a woman in red Louboutins. The bodyguards gesture to Carter and his friends to back away, but the Narco nods, and Carter's squad is whisked into the club with the cartel. Only then does Carter feature that the hulking Narco sports a form fitting, pink satin, Dolce and Gabbana tuxedo. 'Awesome!' Carter exclaims thumbs up. '*Guapo*, I gotta try on those sequins', returns the Narco as the two men head straight to the dance floor swapping outerwear. The girlfriend shoots Carter a look: 'He's my man!' she insists, 'and no fucking way are you gonna hijack my Louboutins!' 'Duh!' says Carter and they laugh the night away.

But for the next three days, Carter can barely move. The American won. Carter suffered an internal beating from which no bloodied brown gender traitor flat-out on the sidewalk can quickly recover. He returns home. He flames. He smolders on my couch slowly rubbing ash into his wounds. I am there to make sure the embers burn out.

Carter is so vivid

I'm going to tell you something that I don't really know: something Carter has barely told me, never made explicit, never uttered, only vaguely hinted at. I'm not sure I should take this leap even though it seems obvious to me. I *K-know* it with the silence of the first letter pressing upon a would-be O. I hesitate to speculate or worse, to interpret, to manifest white privilege by donning the mantle of a story that would make Carter obvious, subject to a demand made by my interpretation. I could say nothing and be only witness or petition my reverie for a dreamlike formulation that organizes intersecting bits into symbolic wholes, but it's never been my strategy to shy from Truth where trauma holds sway. So, I'll tell it like it is.

Carter's family, Carter's father's family, that is everyone but Carter's trembling father, were lined up and shot one-by-one by a narco-terrorist.

I'm naming this trauma because it is what we who listen with evenly hovering attention try not to do – but by default do anyway in order to wrangle with the obvious. I am trying not to anticipate what came first or what comes next. I am no cartographer after all; I do not wish to interpolate an arc to Carter's gender or sexuality or race with a story about a trauma that mucked up a development. I'm wanting to remain un-obvious about what my whiteness lets me know.

It's a paradox, because obvious to me is that interpellation makes explicit all that is too complex for the *Othering* in *oneSelf* to bear. And this I do know: Carter is a man who will not man-up in desperation, a man who will not be defined even if there is a slaughter and a trembling man pressed against a white wall and a pool of red blood. Perhaps there will be words perhaps not. Perhaps there will be a presidential birth. Perhaps there will be a hulking narco-terrorist on some foreign dance floor at the end of the night who tears off a sequin bolero jacket, throws it to the ground and scoffs at his deviant twin: 'I've had enough of you, faggot. Now go.'

References

- Dimen, M. (1984). Politically correct? Politically incorrect? In *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*. Ed. C. Vance. London: Pandora Press, pp. 138-148.
- Harris, A. (2019). (IPA panel introduction)
- Laplanche, J. (2011). Gender, sex, and the sexual. In *Freud and the Sexual: Essays 2000–2006*. Ed. J. Fletcher. New York, NY: International Psychoanalytic Books, pp. 159– 180.
- Mbembe, A. (2017). *Critique of Black Reason*. Trans. L. Dubois. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press.
-

[1] Little, played by Alex Hibbert, is the child protagonist of the 2016 film *Moonlight*.