WAKING NIGHTMARES

Zakiyyah Iman Jackson on David Marriott

If we are unknown to ourselves, we men of colour, it is with good reason. Necessarily strangers to ourselves, we have to misunderstand ourselves, estranged from our selves and from each other. For we are not.
— David Marriott, On Black Men

My first encounter with David Marriott’s work was reading his book On Black Men.¹ The book made me uncomfortable, but in the best possible way, because I found it to be a deeply ethical meditation on black masculinity. Marriott’s writing doesn’t flinch. It asks that its readers confront the murderous fantasies of an antiblack world, the traumatizing effects of racial representation, and, most importantly, the violence embedded in our own fantasies and pleasures. In short, the work demanded that I recognize that a disaster had taken place, at once intimate and removed. With Marriott as my guide, I gazed on the murky waters of black men’s identification with a criminal culture. I found the work inspiring in its bravery and precision. It invites bravery in the reader, as well. I chose to serve as witness to a level of devastation that quite simply cannot be represented. I hope you make the same choice, no matter where you stand in relation to the color line. His work asks us to see the world in a new way, upside down, which is actually right-side up.

While I was excited about a work that would investigate the conditions of black masculinity and sexuality, I was anxious about its singular focus on black men. It is my view that scholarship on men of color should critically interrogate rather than reinforce masculine entitlements or lament their inaccessibility within...
racist heteropatriarchy. For reasons that become clear in this essay, I suggest that despite my initial anxieties, Marriott’s work offers important contributions to queer of color theory and to black feminism. In my view, Marriott’s work offers a rigorous exploration of identification rather than a reification of identity. In his writing, identification is privileged over identity and ontology over the sociology of race.

I feel the most affinity with Marriott’s writing when it illuminates blackness as a structural position, as an ontology rather than an identity or sociological experience, though the latter is usually what we mean when we say “race.” Too often our work is singularly focused on individual experience or relies on a Cartesian form of consciousness. Such work focuses on black people’s identities or stops at what black folks say about their experience without interrogating the conditions that make such speech possible and without interrogating the limits of consciousness itself. I worry that in this work, history and structure disappear. It is my view that the lives of black people of all genders are structured in the context of antiblack existential negation, but it is rare to have our position as shattered subjects theorized and even rarer for it to be theorized with deep attentiveness to gender and sexuality—as Marriott does. His scholarship speaks to the existential paradox of blackness, what I refer to as “existential negation” in this essay—namely, to have subjectivity while one’s subjecthood is constantly negated, one’s voice made inaudible by cultural fantasy, and one’s ego assailed by an Other that is inseparable from the self.

Marriott is known as an elegant theorist of psychoanalysis and culture. But I have been most struck by the ethics of his writing—in particular, by its ability to bring into focus the world’s collective disavowal of the violence subtending the production of blackness. This collective disavowal exists despite or because of the centrality of antiblackness for the production of the world’s sociality. The imagistic quality of the prose is the stuff of nightmares: the dread-inspiring quality of the unconscious life of race, a nightmarish vision of black men that has been imposed across the color line. The following passage gives an example of Marriott’s writing style:

There is, in other words, a remarkable correlation between the imago—the fantasy—of black men in cultural life and black self-images. Behind those images and inverted screens lurks a dark intruder albeit framed by a black (and white) vision of black identity; an imago stalking a little black child through his memories and dreams.

The text’s own style seizes on the imagistic character of the unconscious. Marriott’s concern is with how images can stranglehold the Real: “What if the cultural traf-
fic in *images* of the black man as phobic object—beaten, disfigured, lynched—is trauma enough?”

Yet instead of narrowly interrogating racist representations of black men, Marriott’s work attempts to understand how the pernicious dreamwork of the dominant order infests the psyche of black men. *On Black Men and Haunted Life* ask us (black folks) to confront the disfiguring effects of racism on our psyches and self-images. Racism causes us to turn in on ourselves, to turn away from ourselves with repulsion. And if we agree with Marriott that this interposition is a nearly inescapable reality of the present, how might, and in what ways do, black men desire differently? How might black men’s dreamwork facilitate love for one another, rather than hatred of one another and of the self? And at what point can we properly specify what are *black men’s dreams, black men’s desires*? As Marriott’s work reminds us, embedded in the concept of—“black men’s desire”—there is a contact between antagonistic economies of pleasure and desire that are so enmeshed it is difficult to distinguish their source, in light of what he argues is the irresistibility of identification by black men with their abject life in cultural representation.

Marriott’s prose is graphic in all the following senses: “written or drawn or engraved,” “evoking lifelike images within the mind,” and “describing nudity or sexual activity in graphic detail.” Images of abjected black men surface and then are meticulously interrogated. The imagistic quality of the writing permits no affective escape. You are confronted with yourself and his analysis. And if you run, you know that you are running. His writing sheds light on what is most central, yet most invisible, asking that the reader reflect on how his or her own fantasies and pleasures have been shaped by our culture’s antiblack looking glass—one that turns black bodies into fecal objects. The texts model for the reader a turning toward as opposed to averting one’s gaze from the negativity of the historical present. And this is the heart of its ethical project. The writing itself performs reparation and mourning for foundational and ghostly forms of violence.

Marriott’s scholarship reminds us that queer theory may unwittingly diminish its criticality if it fails to acknowledge the role antiblack racism plays in shaping the discursive practices of gender and sexuality. The violence that produces blackness necessitates that from the existential vantage point of black lived experience, gender and sexuality lose their coherence as normative categories. Moreover, as queer theory attempts to map a territory that encompasses an increasingly generalized nonnormativity, it may unwittingly overlook the function of blackness in modernity, since the black body has been rendered the “absolute index of otherness.” While particular nonblack sexual and gendered practices may be queered,
blackness serves as an essential template of gendered and sexual “deviance” that is limited to the negation not of a particular practice but of a state of being. In other words, there are no practices that an individual black person can take up that will settle once and for all the doubt that accompanies the assertion of a black humanity. Marriott’s texts encourage us to interrogate the subject of feminist and queer theory rather than presume that a subject is always and already there.

Marriott’s writing invites us to reflect on aspects of gendered and sexualized racial experience that often go unaccounted for in scholarly work on race, despite the efforts of black feminism and its theories of intersectionality. Feminists of color have encouraged us to think about gender and sexuality as they intersect with the particularities of race and embodiment. In the context of blackness, gender oppression not only circumscribes the life chances of women but also stratifies or suspends the category of manhood. Black men are seen as “excessively male and insufficiently masculine.” Historically, black men’s “inversion” has served as an alibi for their rape and castration, painful reminders that rape is, as feminists state, “about power” rather than contingent on an essentialized female vulnerability or an inherent male power. Existential negation, which we refer to as “race” in polite conversation, substantially complicates our theorization of “black patriarchy” and “black sexuality.” It requires us to theorize gendered and sexual violence from the underside of “the human,” which arguably necessitates that we think about queerness as something other than an identity, gender, or even set of sexual practices. We might think of black queerness as an existential matter rather than as an attribution that accompanies only some black subjectivities.

Marriott reminds us that nonbeing is the existential burden facing black people under the conditions of (post)modernity and also the specter that haunts queer subjectivity. This is fitting considering that the birth of “homosexuality” is inextricable from the rise of scientific authority and its racism. Fantasies of blackness, particularly black female sexuality, are the gendered and racial specters that haunt queerness—that from which homonormative subjects must distance themselves in order to be properly recognized as humans, as citizens, as subjects. Despite prior interdictions on same-sex sexuality, it is only as recently as the late nineteenth century that sexual acts and desires became constitutive of identity: the homosexual becomes a type. In Siobhan Somerville’s “Scientific Racism and the Invention of the Homosexual Body,” she queries, “is it merely a historical coincidence that the classification of bodies as either ‘homosexual’ or ‘heterosexual’ emerged at the same time that the United States was aggressively policing the imaginary boundary between ‘black’ and ‘white’ bodies?” Somerville goes on to suggest the mutually constitutive effects of the bifurcated categories of race and
sexuality, their structural interdependence and mutual production. Structures and methodologies that drove dominant scientific ideologies of race were subsequently taken up in the scientific pursuit of an emerging discourse of sexuality. Difference was thought to be a visualizable fact inscribed on the body; according to this logic, interiority could be read on the surface of the body’s anatomical markers. Racial difference seemed to hinge on and be most represented by the supposed differences of sexual appetites and anatomies, particularly those of the African female. Sexologists drew on fantasies of black female embodiment as their model of sexual deviancy and gender nonconformity. Racial comparative-anatomy methods were used to determine sexual definition, with a presumed similitude between “deviant” white bodies and the black body. The word *homosexual* itself seemed to conjure some anxieties about miscegenation, as the “barbarously hybrid word” was a mix of Latin and Greek, even referring to “shades of gender” and “sexual half-breeds.”

Reading Marriott in the context of feminist and queer theory offers new insight into the gendered and sexualized nature of blackness’s ontological negation, particularly the nonheteronormativity of race’s reproduction. The negation of blackness is the foundation of ethics and politics, even of modern sociality itself; this negation overdetermines black practices as criminal, queer, nationally polluting, and pathological.

There is a vanishing point between Marriott’s chapters on black “gay” and “straight” men. While the experiences may be different, they share an existential condition: the subject-shattering cycle of abjection and desire. As such, his work suggests that in an antiblack world, antiblack sociality produces a shared condition of subjection, even as we are fractured by identity and experience. This predicament problematizes conceptions of queerness that essentialize it as belonging to a particular identity. Arguably, one could see queerness as the ontology of blackness in culture while theorizing how gender and sexual identities and experiences are produced within the context and logic of antiblackness. Scholarship on identity and experience remains relevant and important because the politics of knowledge and voice are still pressing issues. I am hardly trying to dissuade people from taking up these concerns; rather, I am making a case for scholarship like Marriott’s that shows how attentiveness to ontology and identification can strengthen all of our work. After all, we do not want to reify identities; we want to unpack identifications. I argue that black people’s queerness results from blackness being in the interstices of subject formation rather than stemming from sexual or gendered identities.

I have paired Marriott’s scholarship with that of notable feminist and queer theorists because I believe they can together contribute to a black feminist theory
that highlights the centrality of ontology for questions of race, gender, and sexuality. In my view, queer and feminist theory at their best use the historical and philosophical production of negated subjecthood to organize its interrogations of gender and sexuality. We should use blackness’s existential conditions — commodification, depersonalization, fungibility, and ontological negation — to interrogate the symbolics and production of gender and sexuality. Indeed, I believe that “race relations” produce and are produced by the polymorphous perversity of power, the porousness of the black body — female or otherwise — and inversions of patriarchal power. The foundational violence that produces the caesura in the term black men can direct our feminist investigations of masculinity. I look to Marriott as a cotraveler in my queer feminist pursuits. I hope that we can dream a reprieve together.

Notes

2. We come to understand who we are through a cumulative process whereby we take on, and shed, images of ourselves through our interactions with an intersubjective world that is subjectively experienced. “Identity” suggests the cumulative image that we develop of our self. While the self may appear natural, autonomous, and long-lasting, it is ephemeral and unconsciously intersubjective. “Identification” is the process of shedding and acquiring images that define our identity.
8. In her groundbreaking “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Hortense Spillers offers a theory of black gendering at the limit of the subject. As commodified persons, enslaved Africans were gendered by the dominant society
through patriarchal categories of gendered difference, but in a manner that inverted their meaning. Spillers describes a state of injury that makes gendered and sexual normativity impossible, and argues that this predicament presents an opportunity for an ethical disinvestment in heteropatriarchy. She suggests that black people subvert racist exclusion by establishing intentionally nonheteropatriarchal ways of relating to gender and sexuality as a strategy for liberation. As a result, her work intervenes in melancholic investments in heteropatriarchy (“Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” in \textit{Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture} [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003], 203–29).

9. For instance, I recently had a student tell me she was queer because she is a single mother; her queer theory class had taught that she was queer. While I understand the potentially critical work an expansive definition of queerness performs, I am concerned about how the language of race disappeared from the discussion. The criminality and surveillance that single mothers experience at this time is inseparable from the blackening of single motherhood as a practice. Furthermore, stating that single motherhood is queer does not answer why the nation would need to create “bad” black mothers in the first place. The phrase “absolute index of otherness” is borrowed from Omar Rick’s unpublished paper titled “Turned Away: Hartman and the Performative and Public Sphere Turns.”


15. Roderick Ferguson makes some similar arguments, especially about practices of gender and sexuality where capitalism and the state meet in the context of the United States. See Roderick A. Ferguson, \textit{Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).
