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Masculine Markers

It all started with the “Tarzan” mystique. ...Images of Johnny Weissmuller--tall, muscular, sandy blonde--taming the jungles of Africa, while limiting contact with the natives. Now it’s clear that the day I first saw “Tarzan” is when I started to become aware of the politics of race and gender, and began struggling to reconcile their disparate images.

Unlike Tarzan, who had even learned to communicate with the animals, the Africans hadn’t yet mastered their environment. They mirrored it. Their costumes, if not authentic, at least looked exotic enough to make movie watchers think that native Africans really dressed that way. Dark as the earth under the clustered canopies of leaves and branches, in costume the Africans resembled the chimps and gorillas, and were as civilized as the lions and hyenas. No. They hadn’t yet mastered their environment. They had simply acquiesced to it.

I don’t remember how old I was when I first saw “Tarzan,” but I do remember that I was still living in the first apartment I would come to know. That tells me I was younger than six--old enough to have developed some sense of self-preservation, to wonder about anyone who would call out, in the mists of hungry animals, while swinging from trees. But somehow Tarzan always managed to avoid becoming food. Of course, that was a part of what made him special, mythical. Even at a young age, I knew that his deep, guttural calls and acrobatic swings were about speed and territory. Masculine markers. Had he not tried to transcend his environment in some way, I’m sure I would have found him to be boring, but still unlike the natives. In contrast to Tarzan, the natives

were not boring with their hula skirts and dances (didn't even get the continent right); they were just dumb. At the end of the movie, my brother turned to me and beat his chest. I slugged him, then went to the bathroom and threw up. My mother couldn't understand why I was sick, and I didn't have the words to tell her. Although I had my moments, I was no prodigy. That is what was so scary about it all. I was just an ordinary female-identified, black kid. My mother put me to bed. To her, there was no problem that a nap couldn't solve.

I learned about hate that day—not about how to overcome it, but about how bad it feels in the pit of my stomach when I'm the target. That's how a not yet six-year-old mind sees the world. Neither the earth nor sun is at the center of the universe. S/he is. Like I've said, I was not a prodigy, and no my parents didn't teach me to hate. My first lesson on how to do that arrived by way of Hollywood in the form of "Tarzan". Until I saw "Tarzan", my parents had shielded me from the more direct forms of racism. It was they who lived their working lives in public, and despite all of their flaws, they were my gods. My anti-heroes, actually. My adoration for them was akin to admiring Satan's upstaging of God in *Paradise Lost*. Had Tarzan not tried to master the heart of Africa in some way, and had simply been portrayed as just another native—although white—it wouldn't have been a movie worth making--much less, watching. There's no money in making films in which nothing happens. In that way, art mirrors life. Something unusual, or ordinary but unspeakable, must happen in life for it to be artful. It's no secret—is it? -- that life is an active process.

And I received cues early about how life begins. I don't know how many times my mother warned, "Don't sit with your legs a part," as if my six-year-old body knew the

symbolism involved. Of course, no women in the “Tarzan” had to worry about anyone seeing and desiring their unspeakables, because there weren’t any women in the film. “Tarzan” was like an American western transported to the jungles. *Tough man rides (in this case, swings) through the lawless wilderness. Makes his rules and defends them. In so doing, claims a place for himself.* Of course, the wilderness was too tough for women. If women had arrived, then it would have been by way of import—much like fine clothing or wine. Any who would have taken it upon themselves to venture into the wilderness unescorted would have come across lonely men who would have vied for their services as wives, paid for temporary ownership of their unspeakables, or raped them.

My brother was able to identify with the virility of Tarzan, so much so that he didn’t even react to how the natives were portrayed. Since birth, he had been told that he had the necessary parts to be labeled as male, or young man, even “lil’ man” was acceptable. He just couldn’t be called a “boy.” “Boy” had racial connotations that couldn’t be overlooked by the appropriateness of applying the term to a young, male child. No one in the movie used the word, and the natives played such a minor role, that my brother overlooked the movie’s message. *White man rides through the untamed wilderness. Makes his own rules, etc.* I don’t need to spell it out. The point is this: “Tarzan” had more than one message. One of which was supported by who was portrayed in the film, and another that was implied by who was left out. I also know my brother didn’t realize that there were no women in the movie, and had he, he wouldn’t have cared, because the film provided him with the opportunity to turn to me and beat his chest. He was a part of that pecking order known as men. He was at least on the ladder, and he knew it.

I guess I could have chosen to see the movie as a just portrayal of the way things were, to see racial and gender roles as immutable, but although it's true that I was no prodigy, it's equally as true that I was an exceptional child. What made me exceptional was not my curiosity (every child has that), but my unwillingness to accept the answers about race and gender that were laid before me. What I now know is that my unwillingness came from my being uncomfortable in this world.

When I was a child, the “Black Stone Rangers,” like the “Black Panthers,” were lauded in my neighborhood. They were everyday heroes, the kind that any black, male child could emulate. They were not geniuses nor did they have superhuman strength. What they did was organize programs to feed the hungry and fight for civil rights—make territorial claims and rules, and defend them at the end of a barrel of a gun. At the time, all I understood was that it was impossible for me to sit by a window on a Friday or a Saturday night, since a stray bullet knows no sex. During that period, the myth of the scared, cowardly black male was turned on its head. For the first time in history, black males could beat their chests, and they were doing so all over the neighborhood.

And in some houses. My home life did little to dispel the images of the natives portrayed in “Tarzan”. My father beat my mother weekly, every Friday night, like it was some type of male ritual that was needed to recharge his virility after a long week of work. That was why I made the decision to never depend on a man for my survival. To me, my father's behavior was just an extension of the “Tarzan” myth. Black women were being left behind and had nothing to gain from the empowerment of black men, if it meant being beaten each week. I remember sitting in my room feeling hurt and angry, and I vowed that I would never find myself in the position my mother was in. As a matter

of fact, my dreams began to center on my being the man in my life. I took to wearing my brother's hand me downs, wondered what I'd look like with a beard. Put socks in the crotch of my pants, and was disgusted by my rapidly developing breasts. I rejected being female unequivocally.

What came first, the chicken or the egg? A philosophy professor of mine years ago told me that was an easy question. You can't have a chicken without first having an egg, and you can't have an egg without first having a chicken. So the chicken and the egg always arrived at the same time. Few things matter. I don't know if my sexual and racial identities developed as a result of my activism or despite it. What I learned at an early age is that black meant man, and woman meant white. I watched as black men and white women used the collective oppression of their people to claim oppressed status for themselves. While it's true that black men and white women have been oppressed, it is also true of black women as well as brown and yellow women and men. However, those groups gained only marginal status within those movements, as both black men and white women strove to keep their movements pure. Neither wanted to mix gender and race. The argument goes that they are separate.

Not to me, and not in the history of this country:

Children got by an Englishman upon a Negro woman shall be
bond or free according to the condition of the mother, and if

any Christian shall commit fornication with a Negro man or woman, he shall pay double the fines of the former act.¹

When, in 1661, the state of Virginia passed the first law linking slavery to the womb, the relationship between race and gender became a double helix. Black men aren't quick to acknowledge the role white women played in getting anti-lynching laws passed, and white women are slow to acknowledge that they worked to enact them as much for themselves as for black men. Neither has been able to acknowledge that the lynching laws were used to keep them apart, to control the behavior of white women as much as that of black men, since status, in this country, was inherited from the mother. An inversion of English law in support of the slave system. Although black men tend to view themselves as the beckons for racial hatred, they also tend to be blind to the fact that the mother passed slavery on to her children, and that the children they created with white women were free—something for which America had little patience. Lynching was the mechanism used to keep black men and white women from having brown babies. Black women were a non-factor, because the law already determined their statuses and, therefore, the statuses of their children, making white men free to procreate their own labor force. I remember reminding a history teacher of mine that black women had been slaves also.

It is better to start with an empty glass and have to fill it, than to start with a full glass that needs emptying. My realization of my own oppression did begin with

¹ A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr., *In the Matter of Color: Race and the American Legal Process, The Colonial Period* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), pg. 43.

“Tarzan,” although my actual oppression began at birth. In the delivery room, the doctors assigned me to a sex. My parents then took me home and prescribed a gender for me. I started school during a time when they were first being integrated, and I learned from the television and radio that white parents did not want their children to attend school with me. I attended a Chicago public school; the worst schools in the nation, so I’d heard. Perhaps that’s why I ventured into the South. It wasn’t long before my body began to change--at age nine, to be exact--and my mother responded by telling me I was a woman, and could no longer play with boys, so I stopped playing baseball. Throughout my life, who I am has been prescribed for me, and I have been able to fit in to a group only to the extent that I’ve been able to invalidate parts of myself. I am always living in the margins.

There is so much animosity between gays, lesbians and African Americans that gays and lesbians generally treat me with suspicion, and, sometimes, outright racism. African Americans, on the other hand, just reject me outright, as a freak of nature and another smudge on their already tarnished resume. One thing that being a marginalized female-identified person has taught me is that it is important for me to speak out. It is about the only way that females can claim space for themselves.

As Tarzan showed, that is not true of men. Tarzan, on the other hand, rarely spoke. He called out. As a matter of fact, he didn’t speak at all in the first sequel I saw. In later episodes, he found his human voice, and Hollywood, well, being Hollywood made sure it was an English speaking one. “Me Tarzan. You Jane,” he said while pointing at himself, then at Jane. But Tarzan had a voice before he even uttered a word. His voice didn’t come from what he said, but from what he did. From how he interacted with his environment. His calls through the jungles exclaimed, “Here I come,” or “Gather

around”. A man who “does” has personality, charisma. A woman who “does” is a bitch, who should be avoided. She will not make a good wife, because she can’t follow instructions. No. Tarzan wasn’t a doll; he was an action figure.

However, Tarzan was not complete. Only to the extent that his presence as a muscle man could be seen as exuding sexuality, could he be taken for a sexual being. That lack of clarity was beguiling. One only needs to visit a gym (in San Francisco’s Castro district, for instance) to know that a blonde, good-looking muscle man could easily be gay. Hollywood resolved that dilemma by giving Tarzan a woman, Jane.

The jungle isn’t a nice place for women. It isn’t dainty. That’s probably why there were no women in the first “Tarzan” film. In the jungle, just like the men, women would have been needy. However, unlike men, they lacked virility—the muscular bodies, the speed, and the guttural voices—to lay claim to territory. They would have needed a strong man to protect them from other men. The reasoning goes that in a jungle a woman without *a* man would become a reformed bitch rather quickly (when the lions and apes close in).

“Tarzan” was even more revealing. If it is true that Tarzan, because he was a man, had a voice before he uttered a word, then that means that the African men in the movie did as well and that their voices were no less stereotyped than Tarzan’s. Remember, however, that Tarzan made friends with the animals, while the natives ran from them. (The stereotype of the cowardly black male played out.) Even if one of them had been given a woman, his ability to protect her would have been questionable at best, since he would have been unable to claim territory for himself. The African women would’ve had to speak out, and probably vie for the protection of the men—an inversion of gender

roles, American, or otherwise, since women's sexuality usually carries a higher price tag. To survive, they probably would have had to become sluts, since no one man would have been could protect any of them. Perhaps that explains why African women were also absent from the film.

Of course, Tarzan was not real. His image, however, was. As my brother let me know, Tarzan was every male's role model, whether he wanted him to be or not. As a writer, the most important lesson I learned from "Tarzan" is that there's no difference between my psychological and my artistic voice, that voice is how we interact in this world. It is personality, and it can be verbal, as it tends to be for women, but it doesn't have to be, as often seen in men. The one thing voice is is expression--and expression requires territory. Claiming territory, in a non-stereotypical way, requires emptying glasses and refilling them. The glasses must be filled again, because life is an active process. It must be lived. Since society is by definition a social contract, redefining territory would require a new contract. Masculine and feminine—black, white, brown, and yellow--voices are different, because the role each voice plays in society is different.

I, like many other female-identified people, have masculine markers. No. I don't think I'm Tarzan. Never have. I think, like life, societies are evolving (witness the mixes of skin color), and that I'm a new kind of woman--one who straddles the line between masculine and feminine. And yes, in a society, where gender is binary I have to be at either end of the spectrum.

To define my voice, I need to tell the truth, to look at my psychology, and claim it. Only in that way can I swing through the jungle unafraid.

I'm swinging. Hear my call.

