

## Christina Scheuer: On "Gay Chaps at the Bar"

Gwendolyn Brooks identifies "Gay Chaps at the Bar" as a "sonnet series in off-rhymes, because I felt it was an off-rhyme situation" (Brooks 9). By writing from the perspective of black soldiers who are experiencing the intersecting violences of war and racism, Brooks addresses their complex relationship to their "home" in a country that was still segregated and still motivated by racism, hate, and fear. Brooks' sonnet sequence addresses the sites in which racially defined relationships are both established and challenged, and she also speaks about some of the emotional and practical difficulties of the soldier's relationship to the United States.

Susan Schweik aptly identifies "looking" as both a significant sonnet in the sequence and a central trope of the sequence as a whole. In this sonnet, looking is not only feminized, but motherly, and Schweik uses Mary Ann Doane's theorization of wartime "weepies" in order to analyze the "maternal look" of the poem (MAPS). Schweik is critical of the way in which this feminized gaze reinforces a conservative and conventional set of gender relationships, insisting that "Brooks's 'looking' develops, in part, a similar mythology of feminine relation to systems of representation mastered by men" (MAPS). However, in other sonnets in the sequence, the gender of the "look" is complicated, as looking becomes the central mode of both identification and misidentification, the process through which the soldiers are racialized and the process through which that racialization is complicated, reversed, or undermined. The act of "looking" becomes even more fraught if we read "looking" in conjunction with two other sonnets in the sequence that are structured around sight or the act of looking: "still do I keep my look, my identity . . ." and "the white troops had their orders but the negroes looked like men." In both these poems, visual performativity and the act of looking are foregrounded as potentially positive or re-humanizing agents, yet these potential affirmative readings are undercut by the each sonnet's turn.

By stating that "Gay Chaps at the Bar" relies on letters that she received from soldiers overseas, Gwendolyn Brooks seems to impart her poem with the authority of those voices, relying on the testimonies of men who were "over-there." However, the pretext of the authoritative, authentic male voice is almost immediately revealed as a guise, since the formality of Brooks' sonnet sequence dispels any illusion that she is directly transmitting "letters from the front." According to Ann Fowell Stanford,

By writing in male voices, by revising "the old stories," Brooks resituates herself, moving from the peripheral "woman's" place of observing war, to the center of the action. In so doing she both decanters the traditional male voice and reinscribes war with her multi-leveled meaning, resisting and refuting the traditional notion of women's exteriority to war. The poet's female and marginalized voice then, by cross-dressing in soldier's garb, gains a more central position from which to speak (198).

Stanford's reading of "Gay Chaps" as a kind of "cross-dressing" or drag opens up the gendered implications of the poem, allowing traditional male and female spheres to intersect with and affect one another.

In "the white troops had their orders," the white troops' racializing and "hooded gaze" becomes "perplexed" when it meets the "Negroes" face to face. These first lines complicate the act of looking; instead of establishing a racial divide based on the identification of skin color, "looking" actually confuses such an easy division. The poem also suggests that the cause of the white troops' confusion is the fact that both white and black soldiers were fighting on the same side and that, therefore, distinguishing between black and white became much less important than distinguishing "friendly" soldiers from enemies:]

Besides, it taxed Time and temper to remember those Congenital iniquities that cause Disfavor of the darkness.

The first octet works to suggest that war might have a democratizing influence that would confound racism. The "white soldiers" could no longer keep the "hooded gaze," a phrase that suggests the Klansmen's hoods, which allowed Klansmen to disguise themselves so that they had the privilege of looking at and murdering black men without that gaze being reciprocated or that power threatened. In this poem, however, both black and white men look and are looked at, so that the gazes are necessarily reciprocal.

That hopeful moment is undermined by the sonnet's turn, in which it becomes clear that one of the most significant challenges in distinguishing "dark men" and "Other" came in labeling the soldiers' remains. Only after their bodies had been mangled beyond recognition were the white and black men truly indistinguishable, so that the establishment of equality relies on destruction and mutilation. The last lines confound sight, since the individual bodies have been reduced to "contents" that "had been scrambled/ Or even switched." The racializing look has been perplexed, but not necessarily because "the Negroes looked like men," but because all of the dead men had been equally reduced to corpses or "contents." Therefore, the last two lines are doubly ironic. On the one hand, they announce that intimate racial mixing has occurred in the "scamb[ing]" of the body parts, yet "Neither the earth nor heaven ever trembled" at this supposed affront to the natural order. On the other hand, however, the lines refer to the fact that these men can die and be torn apart, yet the earth remains the same: "And there was nothing startling in the weather." These last lines pose a direct challenge to people who were appalled by anything that challenged racial purity, but they also undermine the epic tradition in which heroes died and the earth "trembled."

"the white troops had their orders" references both the persistent segregation that lasted throughout the war and the spaces in which that segregation necessarily broke down. Racism continues to exist on the battlefield, but the battlefield is also a place where the unreasonable and false bases of racism are starkly, and often grotesquely, revealed. An entry in *The Crisis*'s "Along the N.A.A.C.P. Battlefield" (March 1942) presents the inverse of Brooks' sonnet by informing readers that the president of the American Red Cross had announced that instead of refusing . . . to accept blood from Negro donors, the Red Cross would accept it, but keep it separate from "white" blood plasma. The Red Cross acknowledges that there is no scientific difference between "Negro" blood, and "white" blood, but repeats its belief that in the interest of democracy, the prejudices of men who may need blood transfusions should be respected (100). Here, a medical institution denies what would be best for its patients in favor of a false "democracy" founded on prejudice rather than knowledge. Such a policy was not only grossly insulting to the African Americans who donated blood and inimical to the health of the soldiers and the success of the Allies but, as Brooks' sonnet suggests, such a policy is potentially impossible to maintain.

Like "the white troops had their orders," Brooks' "Still do I keep my look, my identity . . ." begins with an affirmation of the soldier's humanity, though the ellipses that follow "identity" already suggest that the confidence of the title's assertion will be challenged. The first lines echo the tradition of the love sonnet in their sonorous rhythms. Unlike the traditional love sonnet, however, the poem makes no pretence of praising only one person, but rather lovingly gives "Each body" its due: "Each body has its art, its precious prescribed/ Pose." Each person receives his identity from being seen; his identity is a performance, a "Pose" that is re-enacted in every situation. As in "looking," the gaze is here both romanticized and maternal, protective and eroticizing. As such, it is a feminized gaze, but not necessarily a woman's, since the poem suggests a homosocial arenas in which men would know each other's "Poses" more intimately than anyone else would.

Though the gaze is loving, careful to document each soldier's individual identity, the sonnet's sestet once again undermines the significance of this romanticized gaze. The worth of the body is partially threatened in the third and fourth line, when the fact that "grief has stabbed,/ Or hatred hacked" prefigures the destruction (or even the dismemberment) of the body and, therefore, of "its pose." However, the next lines come to reaffirm each individual's right to his own body: "No other stock/ That is irrevocable, perpetual/ And its to keep. In castle or in shack." The last phrase of the octet, however, suggests the evacuation of the body's meaning, since the poet insists that the body keeps pose "Though good, nothing, or ill." The interposing of "nothing" in that line suggest that each body's performance is empty, a mere repetition of meaningless gestures. Then, in the last lines, the affirmation of the body's look is made ironic, even grotesque, by its violent death. After "Having twisted, gagged, and then sweet-ceased to bother," the body can return to "the old personal art." But the word "personal" has been emptied out of value, divested of individuality and potential meaning "it is no more and no less than a "look." The identity that was once so lovingly transcribed has become a grotesque effigy of itself, and the body that could once both see and be seen "that could fix the other through his "look" " has now become an object that can only be gazed upon.

## Works Cited

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