

## Race, Sex Work and Ethnographic Representation or, What To Do About Loki's Toast

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Résumé de l'article

Plutôt que de proposer une étude textuelle de la poésie populaire, cet article vise l'analyse de l'action politique de la cueillette de textes et de la production du savoir ethnologique. Le contenu d'un toast afro-américain, raconté à l'auteur à Chicago, sert à interroger le rôle des distinctions de race, de sexe et de classe dans la construction de l'expérience et de formes artistiques.

# RACE, SEX WORK AND ETHNOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION OR, WHAT TO DO ABOUT LOKI'S TOAST<sup>1</sup>

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I had a change of mind. I was going to take this opportunity to analyze a toast, an African-American oral narrative about a pimp and prostitute. The toast was recited to me from memory by Loki, a man I did some AIDS intervention with in 1988 on the Southside of Chicago.<sup>2</sup> He told it to me one cold day, when the going was rough. The night before I left town, he let me record it, with several others from his repertoire. What struck me about the toast was that although it was clearly a fiction, the reality the fiction indexes doesn't exist in the same way or degree anymore. I thought I'd talk about the changes in the prostitution industry brought about by the drug trade, especially cocaine, and AIDS. Pimping as a way of organizing 'the life' has been eclipsed to a large degree by the intensification of the drug trade, and the implications of the pimp-pro relation have been altered by the risk of HIV infection. Thus, I would use the toast as a sort of myth that I could then demystify by relocating its poetically portrayed gender role stereotypes within local social history. I thought the toast would make an interesting point of departure for a feminist analysis of prostitution, one that would allow me to give a toast of a different sort to Loki.

I thought about what I would actually say, for although the toast said about the pro that "She ranked with the best, from the east to the west", it set her up to be used in a way that doesn't exactly show a sensitive appreciation for womanhood. In fact, like most poems of this genre of folk poetry, the toast, as noted by

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1. This paper was first presented at the Annual Meetings of the American Anthropological Association as part of session sponsored by the Association for Feminist Anthropology entitled "Defining Women: Images of Women in Folklore, Ritual, and Popular Culture", November 23, 1991, Chicago. It was written while in residence at the Rockefeller Foundation Humanities Fellowships Program at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Research in Chicago was funded by the National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA Grant No. 5R18 DAO 5285) and in Belize by Fulbright and the Council for International Exchange of Scholars.

Above all, I would like to thank the late George Lewis, alias "Loki" for his friendship and artful speech, the people in Chicago and Belize City for everything they taught me, Isabel Goldberg, Gerald & Charles Chavannes for their hospitality, and Pauline Greenhill, Kristin Koptiuch, Joanne Lukitsh, Bruce Jackson, Elizabeth Kennedy, and Theresa Mason for comments and discussion.

2. For in-depth discussion of this research see Kane (1990; 1991).

the mostly white male authors who wrote about them in the 60s and 70s,<sup>3</sup> is terribly misogynist. It is also wonderful, which made it an appropriate gift. It was this contradiction, signaled by my bursts of laughter at certain points on the tape, immediately followed by waves of guilt for taking pleasure in even a neat turn of phrase that compliments a whore by reminding us that a dog is a man's best friend.

So yes, in the back of mind, I settled on a theme of analyzing misogyny and how it is possible for me as a woman to take pleasure in it when it is elevated to art. When the time came to actually write the piece, it hit home to me that as a white woman writing this piece about exploitation of a black woman by a black man, I was walking on questionable ground.

So, to help me out of this jam, I turned to three African-American feminist writers — Hortense Spillers, bell hooks, and Michele Wallace — whose essays, I'm ashamed to say I'd never read whole before, but whose generic 'women of color' label, together with acknowledgements of the profound impact they've had on critical thinking, I've been hearing and seeing so much of lately in Anglo and French feminist writings.

And I quickly realized that they weren't going to help me out of this jam, because they'd rather I stop and look at what the jam itself might mean.

In her essay "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words", Hortense Spillers uses toasts as an example in building her argument that images of supersexed black women, together with images of unsexed black women, "embody the very same vice, cast the very same shadow, inasmuch as both are an exaggeration — at either pole — of the uses to which sex might be put" (1984: 75-76). My focusing on these images, then, even if it is to deconstruct them, might nevertheless contribute to the "invisibility blues" to borrow the title of Michele Wallace's (1990) book, that black feminists feel when they see and hear these exaggerated representations of women that are repeated everywhere "from pop to theory".

In her essay "Critical Interrogation: Talking Race, Resisting Racism", bell hooks examines the crucial issues that are involved when "a member of a privileged group" interprets "the reality of members of a less powerful, exploited, and oppressed group" (1990: 55) and how these crucial issues are often disguised with valorizing notions such as intellectual freedom. She ends the essay with this comment:

If much of the recent work on race grows out of sincere commitment to cultural transformation, there is serious need for immediate and persistent self-critique. Committed cultural critics — whether white or black, scholars or artists — can produce work that opposes structures of domination, that presents possibilities for a transformed future by willingly interrogating their own work on aesthetic and political grounds. This interrogation itself becomes an act of critical intervention, fostering a fundamental attitude of vigilance rather than denial (*ibid.*).

3. See Abrahams [(1963) 1970], Agar (1971), Jackson (1972a; 1974; 1975), Wepman, Newman and Binderman (1974; 1976), Reynolds (1974), Evans (1977).

I think this statement is key to the endeavor of analyzing folk poetry in which this journal issue is engaged. In this, if we make a commitment to address issues of gender, we cannot elide issues of race. This is of course what, by addressing the problem of a universalized misogyny, I would have effectively and unconsciously done had I ignored the problem of racial difference between myself and the black woman figure in the toast.

Then I wondered: How to adequately theorize race and sex together? How to, as bell hooks (1990: 53-56) suggests, include an analysis of white ethnicity, to denaturalize that category that is left to stand while we are busy with our mind's hands all over the so-called other? Where in my fieldwork can I discover a point of departure for such an analysis?

I found two points at which a white male gaze of a certain negative kind, directed at me, made me feel the sickness that is racism and sexism, and feeling it, knowing it in a way that book-learning and participant-observation in the usual mode couldn't begin to communicate. The phenomenology of knowledge — how we come to know, what it is we can know, even when we're standing in the same place, looking at the same thing — depends on who we are. This jam is getting deeper, the foundations of anthropology shakier. The very idea that we can go to the field and experience what it's like to live in another culture, to become competent as a native, to be warned even of the dangers of going native, whatever that might be, seems a bit fantastical. Unless we do something to change our methods, I don't believe we can ever come close to achieving those goals, for the mediations that predate our arrival abound, guiding our exchanges down well-worn colonial paths. Unless we allow ourselves to be more vulnerable to the effects of power as they are directed at the powerless, I don't think we anthropologists and folklorists will be effective in making power more compassionate. Most frightening to me, I now realize, is that the global structures that are always already there, because they are just large enough, and because some privileged 'we' have been placed at their center and have not tested their walls, have fooled some of us into thinking we are free to learn, to move about, to love.

In her book, *Women, Native, Other*, Trinh Minh-ha writes:

Trying to find the other by defining otherness or by explaining the other through laws and generalities is, as Zen says, like beating the moon with a pole or scratching an itching foot from the outside of a shoe. There is no such thing as coming face to face once and for all with objects; the real remains foreclosed from the analytic experience, which is an experience of speech (1989: 76).

In this attempt to talk about how women are defined — how prostitutes, in particular are defined — I'm going to make a couple of moves away from a more straightforward analysis of the toast as text.

First, I'm going to relocate the site of analysis to a scene in Belize, an Afro-Caribbean nation of Central America, where I also did fieldwork<sup>4</sup>. The move helps me work against the stereotypical notions indexed in the toast, by resituating them in an analytic context wherein race is not hooked up to gender and power in quite the same way as it is in the urban U.S. This may boost the effect of demythologizing the gender/race stereotypes, because instead of posing the toast's myth against a history that is constructed by those same stereotypes, I pose them against a history with different ideological bases. More specifically, Belize is a context in which blacks are the majority and not the minority, and they are not in the subordinate position within local power hierarchies to the same extent as African Americans are in the U. S. As a result, the image of black women there is not usually linked to prostitution in discourse the way it frequently is in the U. S.

Also, I attempt to problematize the gap between my identity as white woman anthropologist and the black woman figure in the toast, by using a substitute text which conflates my professional identity as an anthropologist with the identity of a prostitute, creating an ambiguity productive of ethnographic knowledge in a different key.

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It was Thirsty Thursday at the club in downtown Belize City. I was there doing ethnographic fieldwork, providing background information for a national AIDS intervention project, should such a project be set in motion. More specifically, I was identifying and describing situations of risk in regard to HIV transmission. The most obvious of these was the prostitution trade organized to service British military personnel. Doing this work solo was rough, so when the Belize government hired a new man to coordinate AIDS intervention and surveillance in the country, I was pleased we had overlapping goals and suggested we try and do some fieldwork together. We set a date to meet at the bar on Thirsty Thursday. I was anxious about going alone, so I went to his office the morning we were to meet to remind him of our appointment. When he began apologizing for not showing up, I suspected he had no intention of coming. But I went ahead with the plan, even though I knew the time he'd proposed, 9 p.m., was way too early. I wore the unsexiest tropical clothing I could find and asked some of my white Creole middle class friends to drop me off — they wouldn't be caught dead in the place. They wanted to know about what I was doing, so I told them I needed to check out the prostitution scene, and they were quite taken aback that I thought that what was going on there was prostitution. "Those are Belizean women who go there. Belizean women aren't prostitutes. They're just out for a good time,

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4. For in-depth discussion of this research see Kane (1993).

some free drinks, you know, partying.” Hmm, I thought; I’d been there before and it sure looked like prostitution to me, taking note of the gap between our perceptions.

Walking upstairs to confront the two bouncers at the door, who said something like, “Hey lady, do you know this is Belize?” I said, with a bravura I did not really feel, that “yes, thank you, I know where the fuck I am.” It was pretty empty. The white soldiers, mostly boys still wet behind the ears, “limeys” as they’re called, were bunched up out on the balcony, and inside, not far from the bar. At the bar, watching CNN, probably post-gulf War propaganda, sat a few black creole women and black and white creole men. On the balcony with the limeys were a few black creole women and one obviously gay black creole man. I got a beer and sat down at a table where I had a good view of everything, and watched and waited. Everyone was watching and waiting; as I say, it was early. The women, dressed up and looking pretty, began to stake out positions at the tables against the wall. The band started setting up. This AIDS coordinator fellow looked to be a no-show for sure. And people started to wonder what I was doing there and came up with the obvious — I needed some bread, I was either new at the game, or new in town, but was making a go for it. There was some tension and some polite curiosity, but no one actually asked me. After appraising my person for a time, the light-skinned creole man started making pimping moves, sending over beers, which it turned out I could not refuse, and so was trying to drink slowly, figuring I couldn’t afford any sloppy mistakes this night. [Recalling Loki’s toast: “So it wasn’t by chance, that I caught her glance. I intended to steal this dame. And I thought with glee, Holy Jesus. Its time for me to gain.”] More people started coming, and by the time the band started playing, the place was jumping. The black gay man was the most boisterously sexual person in the place. The life of the party, he moved round and round, teasing the soldiers, enlivening the subtext of homoeroticism among them, getting the women worked up, and being friendly to me, for which I was grateful. The Chinese owners, flanked by three black creole, one Latina, and one Chinese woman, sat as still as statues along the wall opposite me, also watching the scene.

The limeys started getting drunker, louder, and more integrated. The women who’d staked out positions at the tables early were now squeezed in by men. The dance floor became the focus. I began training my attention on the conditions which would shape the enactment of risk, more particularly, the sexual and ethnic identities of the people, the geography and rhythm of activities, and the sexualization of social interaction. When the pimp wanted to dance with me, I began to weigh my chances of getting out of there without a problem, and I figured I still had some leeway. So I danced with him, and he looked me up and down, telling me I was going to do all right, not to worry, the apples and the oranges ringing up in his eyes like a slot machine. [Perhaps he was dreaming of Loki’s heroic whore: “She tricked with Frenchmen, torpedoes and hitmen. To her they

were all the same. She tricked with Jews, Apaches and Sioux. And some breeds I can't even name.""]

He wasn't too sticky though, and I was on my own again, when I struck up a conversation with a woman, a soldier in the Belize Defense Forces, who came from the same small town in the south where I'd been living at the time. She introduced me to another older women, who seemed to be there looking out for the younger women at the scene, and I told them what I was doing there. One of them said, "Oh, you're the public health lady!" Belize is a small country. It happened that her cousin was the secretary of the man who was supposed to meet me there, and they had spoken about me.

Meeting these women, and having them know who I was, reassured me, and allowed me to stay longer. By midnight, the scene was really hopping. The gay man was doing some wild maneuvers with a black creole woman on the dance floor, pretending to have sex with her, acting out the bisexual possibilities for the limeys, who were now mostly paired off with local women. Other Belizean locals started coming out, and even some men from the Belize Defense Forces showed up, who weren't supposed to frequent this place set up for the Brits. The crowd was loosening up, intermingling. The sex trade was by now effectively indistinguishable from the regular nightlife of the city.

At some point, I don't remember exactly when, a white guy crossed my path, an American who owned some ramshackle hotel by the water. He was there dancing with his wife. I'd met him before, once, when I was looking for a place to stay, but he was full up, and I was just one more gringa passing through. But my presence in this context apparently struck him somewhat differently, for he looked at me with a glance of utter disgust. I'd felt that glance before — because you know when you are the object of it you don't just see it, you feel it, it's visceral. [This conjures Loki's hellish whore: "You can cop her lid, for the lowest bid. You can set her ass on fire. You can dig in her cunt, for a mother-fucking month. She's the cheapest bitch you can hire.""] Where I'd felt that glance before was Chicago, on 47<sup>th</sup> street, just west of Martin Luther King Boulevard to be exact. I'd left the field station where I worked as ethnographer on the AIDS intervention project, because I had to bring some shoes to the shoemaker, and George, one of the older generation of IV drug users who were regulars at the station, insisted that he accompany me. I put on this slightly worn floor length gray coat — trying to stay warm and look like I had no money — but apparently I'd gone overboard, because George started laughing riotously at my down-and-out appearance. On this day, the incredibly narrow space of the shoe store, lined with the old-time banks of high wooden seats, was filled with mostly black men talking, hanging out, staying warm, getting their shoes shined, and when George introduced me, my name Dr. Kane — carried along by its popular connotation — rippled through the house with merriment. Then George wanted to take me in to meet the people in the pawn shop, where he said he did some work — he swept their floors. He took me to the

back to introduce me to the white managers who were sitting at desks behind bars. That was the first time I felt the glance, like I was a piece of slime on the floor.

According to my ethnographic analysis, inspired in part by Annette Kuhn's (1985) analysis of photographs in her book *The Power of the Image*, this glance, and its repetition, was elicited by a certain configuration of features which fixed the meaning of my person within a regime of representation. My identity, from the perspective of these white males, was determined by the context in which they read me. In this context, the white woman-ness of me disrupted the circuit of power and/or pleasure that the white men had come to expect; there, I was the wrong mirror for their masculinity. Because of my disruption, I suffered a glance that left no room for ambiguity, a glance that repositioned me in their circuit of power, a glance that taught me some things.

One thing I learned is how professional identity, when recognized, is like a glass box, through which participant-observation takes place in a shielded manner, and how the quality of data like the glance, viscerally perceived, produces a knowledge effect on the ethnographer that is not necessarily present when that knowledge is mediated by another's experience. If I saw this happen to somebody else, or somebody told me about it, like I'm telling you, it would not intrude upon my analyses in quite the same way. In respect to methodology then, we might want to highlight such accidental breakthroughs, so that the clarity of the situational dynamics obtained can align our more systematic descriptions. I think we all probably do this as a matter of course, but I think it offers a variation that may constructively mix into the stance of critical self-reflection that feminists like Trinh Minh-ha have been cultivating. We might even, in some cases want to engineer such moments, which do not necessarily have to be negative. For as Hortense Spillers has written, "we are not always properly attuned to the deep chords of deception that sound through the language and the structures of thought in which it fixes us" (1984: 83). The glance I twice encountered is a racist glance, because I was a white woman playing the part carelessly, ruthlessly, and regularly assigned to the feature of black women-ness by white men. But it's a slippery thing, because, in the Southside case, had I met those guys in, for instance, Friday night services at the synagogue, I would never have seen it. Because it could be dangerous for me to be misidentified as a prostitute on 47<sup>th</sup> street, I went back the next day dressed in professional garb, carrying my professional card. I told them that they had no right to look at a person like they looked at me yesterday and that I didn't want there to be any confusion about what I was doing out on the street. They acted as if things could not possibly have been as I perceived. Their racism and sexism is recuperated in the discourse of politeness. On the other hand, as a white woman in Belize, there are situations in which I might have engaged in prostitution that would have been more in line with what that American white man would find acceptable in the scheme of things. For instance, if he'd seen me on some yacht, bought for the day, instead of the glance of disgust, I might have



elicited a lucre-promising leer. Sex work, it seems, is highly coded according to the linked features of race and class.

Twice glanced, I was shown how my identity as a middle class white woman is so loosely bound to my body, that if I am inhabiting a social space in which white middle class-ness is not evident through context, if I do not fulfill the conditions required to represent white middle class-ness, the privileges will be immediately withdrawn. In other words, the freedom which I have been led to expect as a fundamental right of bourgeois citizenship is only extended if I uphold the sex, class, and race contracts to which I have been trained. In fieldwork, such a glance blurs the lines between personal and professional, causing the ethnographer a certain amount of productive turmoil. The glance, repeated, keyed me in to the importance of

determining the particular ways in which race structures the organization of sex work. Once keyed in, the ambiguities and recuperations don't shield my observations and analysis as completely.

Through all these peregrinations, believe it or not, I really was hoping still to find a way to use the toast more fully, and the other toasts that Loki gave me as well. But alas, it eludes me. You know, it wasn't easy for me to get it in the first place. That day when things were going rough, Loki said "come on out to the car", and we turned on the motor for the heat, and he recited it to me. He knew I'd really like it. Offering me something that he knew I'd dig professionally was his way of letting me know he cared about me as a friend. And he apologized for not having recorded it, saying that he tried to the night before but his kid was making too much of a ruckus or something. I set up a couple of other dates with him to record it, but it always happened that when he showed up and was in a toasting kind of mood, there was no tape recorder. He told me a lot of great stories too, especially about pickpocketing. He said he'd like me to write a book about his exploits someday. He did tell me that he'd put the toast together with a bunch of guys while he was in jail in Lexington, Kentucky, doing a three year sentence for the sale of drugs (that was before the jail was changed from a Narcotics Farm to a women's prison). ["And you pay a price, when you deal in vice. We all know it takes a steady grind", the toast recalls.] Suspicious folklorist that I am, I asked him if they put it together from pieces of other things. And he said, "well, it wasn't so much pieces from other things, as, it's just the guys' heads, see, it's a co-existent thing". Loki explained the toast was composed by himself and his fellow inmates (who included some well known musicians and criminals) as they lay about on mattresses locked in otherwise empty rooms for hours on end. Later, in the library, I came across Wepman, Newman and Binderman's (1974) article that quoted some key lines of a toast the authors called "The Fall". They matched up roughly with Loki's.

Loki's toasted whore eventually fails him. ["Now the real trouble began when the girl took sick and quit gin. She had the piles and inflamed biles. For a

month she couldn't pee. When her ovaries failed I was shocked to hell. Cause things really looked bad to me. When lockjaw set in, believe me friend. The Chinaman took his toll. Her head was dead, her ass was red. And the lips on her cunt was cold." ] When Loki, as the pimp *in* the toast, saw the woman couldn't make it anymore, he went to get another. The heroine-turned-hellion got mad and had him thrown in jail for pimping. This takes him out of circulation, but doesn't stop the game. The toast ends with the toaster — sitting the jail: "Farewell to the nights and the neon lights. Farewell I say to it all. Farewell to the game, may it still be the same. Next year, when I'm through doing this fall."

While Loki and his prison mates certainly keep the toast alive, and add their own names and twists, the toast isn't what you'd call strictly "original". But that doesn't change anything, does it? I do wonder about the circulation of these images of prostitutes, the way they are encoded in artistic forms like toasts and pornographic photographs, how they are authored, and how they reproduce a circumscribed set of racial conventions that organize the circuit of money and pleasure that is sex work, and the circuit of money and pleasure that is not sex work, but academics.

In closing, I'll tell you this little verbal joke played on me down on the Southside. It was Milton, another old regular at the field station — he come up to me and said:

"I had a dream last night and you were in it."

And I said: "I hope it was beautiful."

And he said: "It was beautiful all right. As a matter of fact, I owe you some money."