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MISOGINIA Y FILOGINIA:
Fuerzas discursivas simbólicas
en la narrativa internacional

José García Fernández, Giuliana Antonella Giacobbe, Rocío Riestra Camacho
(editores)

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en la narrativa internacional**

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INNOVACIÓN Y UNIVERSIDAD



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THE SL*T'S PLEASURE(S): NOT QUI(E)T(E) LIKE A VIRGIN

LOS GOCES DE LA P*TA: LA VIRGEN QUE NO ES CALLAÍTA

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Resumen

En este artículo, el propósito es plantear la manera en la que los tropos de la Virgen y la Prostituta son revisados y problematizados en la poesía de Ana Carrete y Gabby Bess al plantear críticamente las paradojas de la sexualidad femenina actual y la violencia que se ejerce contra estos cuerpos sexualizados en la cultura popular actual.

Palabras clave: poesía, sexualidad, dicotomías, cultura popular, tildar de puta.

Abstract

In this paper, I discuss the manner in which the tropes of the Virgin and the Whore are revisited and problematized in the poetry of Ana Carrete and Gabby Bess by critically depicting the paradoxes of contemporary female sexuality and the violence exercised to these sexualized bodies in contemporary popular culture.

Keywords: poetry, sexuality, dichotomies, popular culture, slut-shaming.

Around 2012, Gabby Bess published an online chapbook titled *Black Dot Series*. The series consists of a word or brief poem inscribed within a big black circle upon a white background, with a brief description beneath it, which is usually related to the content of the black dot. Most of these short poems are related to sex and intimacy, through which the poetic voice

expresses her sexual desires as well as a longing for the affection of others: the boundaries between these two impulses are integrated without being distinguished separately. There is one particular dot-poem that will serve to introduce the topic that is of concern to this article. The poem contains the word “sl*t” inside the black circle, and a subtitle in cursive that reads as “*the slut word*”. In here, Bess expresses her sexual desires through the figure of the *Slut*, a slur usually thrown to women who are socially perceived as being too sexual with regard to what is considered to be “respectably” average.

According to *Urban Dictionary*, an online dictionary whose entries are created by users, *slut* is defined as “a disgrace to all women” or “a person that has promiscuous sex. Someone who sleeps around, not great for a relationship” (2018: par. 1). According to these definitions, the configuration of the contemporary myth of the *slut* revolves around women’s sexual role and agency in *hook-up* culture, the tensions of the hypersexualization of women’s attitude as a socially, and, still heavily, gendered display of contradictory feminine attributes as well as racist and classist performative conflicts that intersect with reputation and morality in Western societies.

These definitions do not constitute accurate linguistic descriptions of a word, but rather discursive samples of rhetorical sexual shaming which still police women’s bodies and behavior patterns. The *Slut* is just the counterpart to the *Prude* just as the *Whore* opposes the *Madonna*: the same dichotomies that classify femininity in terms of good and evil are twisted and establish a paradoxical situation in which women do not want to put themselves in so as to not to be trapped by labels of promiscuity or sexual undesirability. As Greer claimed in the *Female Eunuch*, words such as *slut* or *whore* refer to an unconventional kind of woman, off the limits, “those which bear the weight of neurotic male disgust for illicit or casual sex.” (Greer, 2012: 296).

According to a recent report made by the department of psychology from Auckland University of Technology, researchers Farvid, Braun and Rowney examined a group of young women’s answers to an interview about their personal views and experiences on heterosexual casual sex, and the sexual double standards about what a *slut* means for them. The report,

called “*No girl wants to be called a slut!*”, concluded that “all 15 women in this study gave accounts of an agentic and desiring sexuality, yet talked about casual sex and a sexual reputation in contradictory and contested ways” (Farvid, Braun and Rowney 2017: 544). The study also concludes how a sexually liberated Western society still engages into women’s repression of their sexuality by “silencing” these casual sex experiences publicly, influencing their social and sexual reputation in a positive or negative manner. This “silencing” reinforces the double standard associated to the label *slut* in relation to current perceptions on the female sexual performativity by others, even though women’s sexual agency and assertiveness is mostly accepted and even expected.

Evidence of this, almost coming from the last traces of analogical archivism, can be found within the *Riot Grrrrl Collection* initiated at Fales Library and Special Collection, New York University, in 2010. The document presented at this section belongs to the collection donated by *Bikini Kill*’s ex-front singer and leader Kathleen Hanna, who authors the text as well. The document, dated in 1989 (Fateman, 2013: 148), has two sides, each one is divided into four sections, since the flyer has been deliberately folded into a smaller piece. This method suggests that there is an intention of it being open by means of revealing its content, like a secret note passed between students during a class at school. In fact, Hanna intentionally put these flyers on “baby-sitters books” and other materials aimed for young girls at public libraries, so her target audience could have access to them, as she explained in an interview for the *HuffPost Live*.

In the first side of this flyer, one can see how the word *slut*, in a big font and followed by a dot, is employed in order to serve as a cover for the flyer itself. Once the paper is unfolded, a definition of the word is provided at it follows by using a teenage-like informal speech: “slut. Usually SLUT is a put down meaning that a girl has sex, or has sex with lots of different people”. So far, the *slut* stereotype remains the same after almost thirty years. It also adds: “it is also a very easy way to hurt a girl’s feelings”. This sentence is important, since Hana acknowledges, way before Tanenbaum, that the figure of the *slut* is evidently linked to the

bashing and shaming of a girl or a young woman by exposing her sexuality publicly.

Hana was also famous for producing another *slut*-related work by employing her own body as the canvas at various concerts with her music group *Bikini Kill* during the early 1990's. According to Leah Perry, this form of "body writing" can be considered a form of "reclaiming a word" through the "performance of shamelessness", which is defined as "the performance of alternative forms of young female value" in order "to resist patriarchy and the brutalities of neoliberal capitalism" (Perry, 2015). As Hanna also confesses at the *Huffpost* interview, she was trying to defy the "male gaze" by labelling herself as a *slut*, and so, assuming that it was what men would be thinking about her.

In *I am not a Slut*, Leora Tanenbaum dissects the implications of the use of this term among teenagers and young adults in a contemporary US socio-cultural context. She argues that the *slut* paradox derives from "(...) a modification of the virgin/whore dichotomy that has plagued women since the third millennium BCE, when the ancient Sumerians divided women into the categories of wife and prostitute" (Tanenbaum, 2015: 447). The connection between prostitution and the institution of marriage is mutually exclusive as well as co-dependent to it at the same time. As Itziar Ziga suggests in *Devenir Perra*, the division of women into "good" ones and "bad" ones works together (Ziga, 2009: 113), is equally encouraged by men, married women and conservative feminists, who policy over the body of the *slut* in order to maintain the "heteropatriarchal order" (Ziga, 2009: 113). For Ziga, this form of misogyny is expressed through "slut-phobia", or *putafobia* in Spanish (Ziga, 2009: 113). Hence, the control over the use of women's bodies and their sexuality results into the "colonization of women's bodies" as a "material reality" (Dworkin, 1981: 203).

The use of this division can be understood in two different manners: the wife's role as a "good" woman is to provide offspring inside the institution of marriage, whereas the whore's trade is to provide instant gratification to men's sexual needs and fantasies, which are normally unsatisfied inside marriage, through the business of sexual work. It seems that the main difference between a "wife" and a "whore" is their legal positions and the

tasks they have been assigned to provide and exchange under the financial domain of men in society. This legal status has been also transformed into social privilege under the morals of *female honorability*, as Gail Pheterson suggests:

If a prostitute is a woman who “sells her honor for base gain or puts her abilities to infamous use,” then by definition she has no honor and does no good. It is important to recognize that the woman’s shame is based upon what she offers (her body and her sexual abilities) whereas the unworthy cause to which she puts herself is presumed man’s sexual desire as customer (in slang, *trick* or *john*) or man’s financial interest as “pimp.” We are in fact then talking about female dishonor and male unworthiness. (Pheterson 1993: 42)

Sexual purity and slut-shaming are intimately connected to a woman’s social reputation, and Carrete’s poem “minami minegishi” (Carrete, 2014: 35) clearly illustrates this issue by using a J-idol’s controversial viral video as an example of slut-shaming in pop culture. To briefly contextualize it, Minami belongs to one of the most popular Japanese pop (J-pop) female groups, *AKB48*, who recruits girls in their early teens to train them into singing and dancing until they reach adulthood. The professional contract includes a clause that forbids them from dating other people during their stay in the group in order to preserve the childish and pure *kawaii* image of these idols to satisfy their fans’ fantasies as well as the industry’s needs. Carrete acknowledges this fact in the following lines:

japanese pop idols aren’t supposed to have boyfriends
they’re supposed to be virgins for their fans
(Carrete, 2014: 35)

In 2013, Minami broke this agreement when she was caught by paparazzi leaving J-idol boyband Alan Shirahama’s apartment after spending the night with him. As a result of this, she was downgraded from her position in the group, and forced to publish a disturbing video at the group’s official channel in which she appears apologizing to her fans by shaving her head. The way she publicly apologized can be interpreted as a form of slut-shaming,

related to what is translated as “the rule is known as *renai kinshi* or ‘forbidden love’” (Carrete, 2014: 35), as Carrete expresses in the poem as well. According to J-pop culture, pop idols must keep up with appearances, known as *tatema*, and show respect to their fans through leading an exemplary life as public figures. This means that they must avoid having any kind of sexual liaisons or abstain from having any kind of romantic relationships in the privacy of their lives. This poem denounces how women’s private lives and intimacy turn into objects of public interest once they become part of the public sphere as celebrities, and so to be freely scrutinized by the audience. This also shows how virginity is still commodified as part of the female artist’s identity, otherwise, and as Carrete warns the reader, “if they’re off-limits they’re no longer worthy of fan’s/ adoration and fantasy” (Carrete, 2014: 35). Carrete uses Minegishi’s visually shocking case to illustrate the absurdity and the dangers of a widespread obsession about women’s sexual purity and chastity. There is another example of female celebrity blaming in “the cult of eternal youth” from *Baby Babe*, by Carrete as well:

if i shaved my head would people think i’m like
 britney or would they think i’m like
 natalie portman or would they not care at all

and would you stop loving me or
 would you point and laugh but still
 kiss my forehead (Carrete, 2012: 5)

In this poem, we see how the figure of American pop-star and singer Britney Spears, simply referred to as “britney,” stands as a symbol of public shaming, representing how social pressure and expectations on women can push some celebrities, particularly women, to their limits. Spears, who was forced to be placed under a conservatorship with her father Jamie Spears from 2008 until 2022, shaved her hair in 2007 after going into drug rehabilitation. That same year, she lost the physical custody of her children in favor of her ex-husband, Kevin Federline. As a result of these scandals, she became the center of public mocking because of consequent incidents with the constant paparazzi’s persecution

and harassment. A picture of her definite breakdown, bald and in an aggressive attitude trying to attack a paparazzi with an umbrella, turned viral due to her previous status as the ideal and virginal American pop idol: this was the peak momentum of her non-stop downfall into public disgrace and legal disputes over the management of her artistic career and private status.

Culturally speaking, women's long hair is considered a feminine beauty trait, and by shaving it, Britney erased her attractiveness by connoting androgyny or even masculinity: a rebellious act against the sweet and virginal next-door American-girl dream she represented throughout her early artistic career. During the 2000's it was not infrequent to see that women's sexual lives and agency were used against them, especially when they were celebrities. That is the reason why many US female artists publicly claimed their virginity in order to be considered respectable by the industry and the audience: to name a few, Jessica Simpson, Demi Lovato, Selena Gomez or Miley Cyrus wore "purity rings" to publicly claim a vow to remain virgin until marriage. The case of Britney Spears was paradoxical since her artistic aesthetic lingered between virginal sexiness and relative slutiness. But her reputation started to collapse once her ex-boyfriend, also singer Justin Timberlake, betrayed her by confessing to the press that they engaged into sexual intimacy while they were dating.

This controversy becomes raunchier in terms of the re-appropriation of slurs, such as the one of the *Slut*, in order to subvert its meaning and neutralize its effects on people's configuration of personal subjectivity and social identity: the translation from the "I" into bodily expression and the performance of the *slut*. In "virgin or witch", also by Ana Carrete (2012: 44), we find allusions to the Disney movies' villains in relation to an ambivalent duality of femininity. The opposition between these two tropes of womanhood relies on the fact that witches were considered to be sexually active in relation to their association to satanic rituals and their rejection of conventional marriage.

Carrete's poem creates a series of word-plays in relation to an image that appears next to it. The options that are displayed in the image reminds readers of the civil status or gender/sex options

displayed at a questionnaire for compiling basic information about a person, like “single”, “married” and “other”. Instead of using these ones, Carrete changes them for the words “virgin” and “witch”, which basically establishes the duality of femininity that culturally represents good and evil. The ticks represent the “v” in “virgin” whereas the double tick is the “w” in “witch”: this poem clearly illustrates how Carrete smartly plays with images, symbols and words in order to establish a connection between her poetry and the visual, incorporating together innovative, humorous and witty new media at the same time.

Tracking back the implications of the manner in which female sexuality and women’s bodies have been commodified through exploitative patriarchal structures such as prostitution or marriage, Tanenbaum also argues that women’s sexual repression has been translated into a series of derogatory terms that perpetuates a sexually gendered hierarchy, by submitting and regulating women’s excess of sexual activity while justifying and encouraging male “uncontrolled” sexual activity (Tannenbaum, 2015: 288). According to Tumanov’s findings, the Madonna-Whore complex works in order to prevent men’s anxiety about “paternal uncertainty” facing the possibility of women’s promiscuity working against their need to biologically avoid their own individual “genetic extinction.” (Tumanov, 2011: 508). From the perspective of evolutionary psychology, Tumanov argues that “mythology is the symbolic manifestation of our two key biological concern – survival and reproduction” (2011: 508). Therefore, sexual repression becomes a way to police women’s fertility, and to ensure paternal exclusivity as a commodity.

Men’s fear and anxiety about paternity is projected upon the regularization of “sex” through the materialization of bodily practices, as Butler contends in *Bodies that Matter*: the legitimization of virginity as a valuable characteristic for an accepted, and so respected, form of femininity. The acceptance or rejection of sexual promiscuity as a gendered performance of sexual freedom is culturally constructed upon this biological justification, whether this last one is factual or not. The acceptance of female sexuality would only occur under the grounds of men’s control and possession of women’s bodies to ensure their reproductive means at the dangers of potential

promiscuity outside marriage. This is what Freud argues in *The Taboo of Virginity*, commenting on the idea of von Krafft-Ebing's "sexual bondage" in relation to the satisfaction of "a virgin's desire for love":

(...) to describe the phenomenon of a person's acquiring an unusually high degree of dependence and lack of self-reliance in relation to another person with whom he has a sexual relationship. (...) Some such measure of sexual bondage is, indeed, indispensable to the maintenance of civilized marriage and to holding at bay the polygamous tendencies which threaten it, and in our social communities this factor is regularly reckoned upon. (Freud, 1948: 193-194)

As Butler explains, defending the imagined existence of the "virgin's desire for love" (Freud, 1948: 193) is the materialization of "sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative" (Butler, 1993: 2). Freud's explanation of virginity perfectly describes the workings of misogyny, manifested in the Madonna-Whore complex that has dominated the patriarchal Christian and Western discourse, and which has been policing femininity for centuries until the present moment. Therefore, in order to elevate the idealized form of heteronormative femininity, encapsulated in the myths of the Madonna and romantic love, there must be an antagonist, a nemesis: this evil would be represented through the figure of the *Whore*, and much later, by the contemporary re-mastering of this one as the *Slut*. The pulsating opposition established by these dichotomies ensures that the norm is kept immutable. As Valenti would claim in *The Purity Myth*, US culture has employed the "virginity movement" as a crusade against the "porning of America". The hypersexualization of culture has become a major threat to justify the myth of purity, which glorifies sexual abstinence in today's sexually liberated society:

Movement leaders *need* pornography in order to justify the extreme nature of the purity message they're pushing. Pornography and purity may make strange bedfellows, but they are sharing sheet space all the same. (Valenti, 2009: 1119)

Like two mutually-exclusive sides of the same coin, virginity and pornography work to ensure their mutual coexistence: one cannot exist without the other, since sexual liberation does not really exist yet. This is what Tanenbaum argues when she describes the prevalence of distinguishing between the “good slut” and the “bad slut” as a tension between compulsory sexual performativity expected within heterosexual interactions, and as a projection of men’s pornographic fantasies into romantic relationships:

A girl’s compulsion to achieve the “good slut” status is the result of the prude/slut contradiction. Not wanting to be perceived as prude, girls perform an act of sexual bravado – whether they want or not” (Tanenbaum, 2015: 879)

Here, Tanenbaum questions the very nature of the performativity of the role of “good slut” as a form of sexual agency in which girls and young women behave according to their own sexual desire and for the sake of pursuing their own individual sexual pleasure. It rather seems an imperative to be sexual inside the constraints of monogamous relationships with men: a transformation of Freud’s conceptualization of a devalued vision of romantic love and virginity associated to *prudeness*. This form of sexual passivity involves a desired and expected, yet controlled and measured, amount of *slutiness*. A new revalued form of femininity that is highly influenced by the expectations created by accessible hardcore online pornography. However, this does not necessarily mean that a *slut* is perceived as a totally positive female figure in contemporary culture.

Concerning the body of the *Slut* and self-objectification, Gabby Bess takes a step further in her poem “INSIDE OF THIS POEM THERE IS A ROCK AND THEN THERE IS ME” (Bess, 2013: 396-403) The process of objectification and hypersexualization of the poet’s body is a desired state of being, as it is described in the following lines: