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Vanilla on Top

How White Folks “Other” Themselves for Fun and Profit

By Richard Leader

Vanilla Sex: most of us prefer to think of it as something that only happens in Red States. There are few things more politicized than the missionary position. Even as “sexologists” competing for their own slice of the lucrative dirty-dictionary pie have worked to come up with their own spurious etymologies for the term, trying in vain to locate the first region where indigenous people were first taught to do it as the Good Lord intended, such accusations of colonialism are hypocritical for their own belief in some sort of sexual variant to the Noble Savage mythology; a popular bit of Blue State imperialism, where men with skin browner than not are still presented by the media as virile predators for white entertainment. Such pop-culture depictions of Sexual Chocolate, inseparably yoked in the minds of many to the animalistic connotations of “doggy style,” yet another politically loaded name for a sexual position, renders any implied sense or usage of Vanilla with a capital V against a backdrop of racist power.

Being that Vanilla Sex (and blandness in general) is something often attributed to Red States, many gallant white Liberals might find themselves delighting that their own sexual escapades—if only in their imagination—take cues from the “exotic” practices associated with the oppressed, presuming almost hopefully that only Republican men are selfish and monotonous and that their women are forced to suffer through it, thinking of dear old England. But using “vanilla” as an aspersion, especially when the pejorative light is twinkling to the beat of one’s own ego, does absolutely nothing to divest one of racial privilege, even for hip white folks in the big city.

Real power is power, not hot sex. While many black men have come to embrace various sexual mythologies imposed upon them as they seem advantageous, or at least something rather than nothing, there are many competing but mutually reinforcing definitions of masculinity and being pigeonholed into but one still remains a handicap in the contest of patriarchy. Sheila Jeffreys noticed a similar trajectory amongst women, calling the pursuit of the “orgasm of oppression” the next opiate of the masses in her 1996 “How Orgasm Politics Has Hijacked the Women’s Movement.” She argued that to eroticize power is to legitimize both it and how it is distributed; that the roles humans are forced into to determine whether such power is delivered or denied come to be presumed as natural. Even if popular experimentation in “topping” and “bottoming” does prove these roles to be mutable, any demonstration of their mercurial and arbitrary possibilities does nothing to upset the notion that these roles themselves are both inevitable and desirable.

Vanilla, as a cultural marker, is a deceptive fiction that works to confuse such issues of power. Consider the story of Lilith, Adam’s rumored first wife who was created in the same manner as he—rather than from him—who refused to lie below him in the missionary position. To many today Lilith’s agency has come to be associated not with her distinct manner of creation but with the way in which she chose to engage in sexual intercourse, as if a slight alteration of a temporary position in physical space could rectify more serious issues of power. The version of Eve whittled from Adam’s rib still would have remained subordinate even if handed a pair of handcuffs and a leather riding-crop: the Apostle Paul’s argument that women should remain silent was directly footnoted by the order of divine creation and not what happened in the bedroom. Yet the missionary position (and other signifiers that have come to be associated with the category of Vanilla) is itself seen as both a symptom and now a cause of oppression: in this worldview, Eve could have just followed Lilith’s example to have entered into freedom—or some semblance of it worthy of explicit and repeated notice under

the banner of “sex positivism”—simply by selecting any number of other positions that photograph better in pornography.

The contemporary interest in Lilith’s story presents a paradox: it at once serves a specific cultural purpose, ostensibly feminist, serving as a positive example of female empowerment, yet the fulcrum for the heroine’s rebellion (the supposition that the missionary position itself is fundamentally submissive) is not generally believed by those interested in its retelling, at least with any amount of conviction. What *is* commonly believed in our world, I will argue, is that individuals *are* inherently slaves and slave keepers: only social circumstances permit varying levels of honesty regarding the expression of this sentiment. Feminism as a rubric, philosophy, and an experiential process is one such social circumstance. Personal responses to feminism in all of its myriad aspects impose certain filters on when expression of this belief (and ultimately of more importance: the question of whether it ought to be believed at all) is appropriate and how such performances will be carried out.

As many feminists, scare-quotes unnecessary, have internalized this message of born slaves and slave keepers, the story of Lilith—and the implicit comparison to Eve—compresses the various competing interests at stake into a parable that is socially useful in navigating their contradictions. It at once fills the modern requirement of bolstering female agency while preserving the foundation of domination and the roles required for it: repeating the tale (chiefly, reiterating it to those who have already heard it and know intuitively what it is used to signal socially) allows the teller to construct for herself a specific sexualized identity apart from those who do not give such social performances. Those who do not are constructed into Vanilla archetypes of various sorts, in order to divide the good non-Vanilla slaves and slave keepers from the bad Vanilla slaves and slave keepers. Lilith is only one example in such an arsenal.

The term itself is hardly used as often as it is in circles devoted to Bondage/Discipline/Sadomasochism (the acronym “BDSM” seems overly benign compared to its long form, perhaps by inten-

tion), who often employ it to describe anyone outside of their preoccupation and the capitalist webs that serve as a backdrop for their fixation: Vanilla, always referring to others, is a way of focusing on the insider-outsider dynamic and to privilege the group in conceptual space. Accusations of Vanilla do not at all rely on factual evidence of what others do in the bedroom but what one group needs to imagine them doing in order for the insiders to shore up their own sense of identity. Thus, the very idea of hypocrites tends to be elided. While exposing the kink of the God Fearing might be good for a giggle, the amusement is its own end and political implications remain unexplored; outsiders must forever remain Vanilla, just as adherents must remain “otherwise,” even if their own acts begin to mirror the very worst aspects of mainstream culture. If, on one hand, Vanilla Sex is indicative of pre-feminist consciousness and inextricably linked to subjugation (hypothesized as inherent to the missionary position), and is therefore suspect, that the new and improved alternative-sexuality to Vanilla actually includes the word “bondage” in part of its acronym is a galling admission.

Non-vanilla sex is not considered superior for what it is but for what it is not: and that is normative. No one in a Blue State wants to be considered average and as Americans we all love a good underdog story. While conservatives have often made ham-handed complaints about identity politics, ignoring the anachronistic folklore they must invent for themselves to even launch such attacks, identity politics in the Liberal consciousness have shifted dramatically from their roots (typically Marxist) over the course of the past few decades. Identity, rather than something forced upon you from external influences, has been transformed into internal mental-gymnastics: women are no longer adult human females but any person who believes herself to be a woman, a social class that is far easier for males to colonize into than it is for females to opt out, patriarchy and postmodernism collaborating to decide precisely when biology is permitted to matter. In one sense, to be normative is to belong to a potentially oppressive class that has its own perspective privileged over that of others (“straight white male,” with the inclusion of other

possible adjectives: educated, able-bodied, white-collar, Christian, etc.), but within the new construct of choice-centric identity politics it takes on a secondary meaning. To be normative is simply to be ignorant.

Eve was ignorant of the alternative sexual practices that would have somehow rendered her Adam’s equal (or even superior) and her lack of choice was emblematic not of God creating her as a birthday gift for another being but of her own lack of imagination, something for which she herself can be blamed. For this, it becomes safe to revile her. In rational terms, Lilith occupied a higher social position than Eve (a status demonstrated now in the prior’s role as a feminist hero and festival mascot) and yet Eve’s own oppression has become evidence of guilty compliance that puts her own identity in line with that of Adam’s: she is the normative housewife who glares sternly at the fetishistas over on the wrong side of the tracks.

As Eve (and the putative straight white women she represents) is thought to be utterly conventional by those who believe themselves otherwise, her Vanilla nature in and outside of the bedroom is deserving of scorn. The normative housewife is a born submissive—Eve before eating from the Tree of Knowledge—while the BDSM practitioner is able to imagine herself freely choosing that same submissive role. Similarly, it is now Vanilla for a female not to reject the very concept of “woman” (and any feminist praxis that is built upon that base) as an archaic fairytale, while a male choosing to enter into the tradition of womanhood is seen as a perfectly genuine pursuit that must be respected and honored. Thus those possessing less agency are seen as the oppressors of those with more, a grotesque reversal.

With that in mind, no sex act is actually Vanilla: people in Blue States do it in the missionary position, too, after all. The position itself is only subservient when alternatives are lacked, which seems a sensible enough assertion (as a more direct word for that lack of alternative might be *rape*) but for the fact that so many, if not all, of the available alternatives also eroticize subservience; the ideal of choice trumping that of freedom. Vanilla Sex is thus conveniently

whatever Vanilla People do or are imagined to do. Sorting out the mechanics of those sex acts is only half as problematic as this imagining of people as Vanilla in the first place.

To be Vanilla is not just to be normative, it is to be banished wholesale from the new process of identity-politicking that favors choice: Vanilla people have none and are forced to derive their class-based identity from outside opinion, whether they are receptive of the outcome or not. Whereas identities that resulted in nonstandard or exotic “flavors” were once a liability (as it continues to be for those existing in, and under, traditional minority categories), today they are more often than not the result of privilege as it is upwardly mobile and highly educated whites who are most able to carve out for themselves a non-Vanilla identity while simultaneously working to buttress the myth of Vanilla to and append it to their social competitors.

Two separate and antithetical models of identity thus exist, the old as a personal response to external constraints and conflicts, and the new where identity can exist as a intrinsic core value irrespective of the outside world, even if it is signaled by various arbitrary “performances” people make in their daily lives. The conflict between these two models is exacerbated further by the fact that many of those partial to this newer philosophy (often filed under the general heading of Queer Theory) still rely on the pronouncements of those laboring under the Feminist and Marxist viewpoints: at least when those conclusions on identity can be wielded as a hammer against those outside their own personal circles of association, against Vanilla people, those uncomplicated folk to whom all the simplistic “old” analyses still apply.

Many feminists are critical of this new conception of identity, finding it to be no accident that at precisely the same moment when the people historically determined by male authority to be women have attained some measure of true agency by organizing together *as* women, that the same male authority has finally allowed the category of “woman” to be “deconstructed.” Other feminists believe such arguments to be mired in essentialism (being more par-

tial to deconstruction at any cost, even if it is males who benefit first and foremost from this arrangement); some even go as far as to accuse the former of being Vanilla themselves for their rejection of such identity politics, even if that rejection is made on philosophical grounds and not out of the bias of “normative ignorance.” This can be a socially devastating insult to women, no matter the specifics of their individual class identities, and its increasingly frequent usage amongst feminists is perhaps made even a bit more disturbing when one ponders that the word “vanilla” itself is derived from the same sheath-like Latin root for “vagina” that many feminists reject for their own bodies.

For the young, Vanilla is to be sexually inadequate and not experienced enough to disingenuously regard sex as *passé*—in as much as make-believe detachment has always been the hallmark of cool—and the normative connotations of Vanilla often serve to exile women with unpopular beliefs, whether they are radical or regressive, from the feminist community as a whole by presenting them as the oppressors of women: being that they are women themselves, they must first be promoted to a fictional class of *überfrau* in order for such a reversal to succeed. Consider the distinctions routinely made between the large number of bisexual feminists, who are nearly always partnered with men themselves, and the allegedly more conventional women (the ones who do not read *Bitch* or *Bust* or associate with all the right social circles) who experiment with “culturally sanctioned” bi-curiosity. The latter are at once seen as pawns for their ignorance and yet their presumably normative status obviates against a sympathetic reading: as their interests are assumed to be in line with those of men, so becomes their class-identity, which is externally mutable given their Vanilla status.

Whether such patriarchal-enforcers (or “token-torturers”) occupy a less privileged position amongst women for their inability to escape such collusion, or should be greeted with malice for any rewards that more normative women purportedly receive, is a profoundly antifeminist argument, benefiting neither side, as the sides are entirely fictive and drawn for the benefit of patriarchy.

As individuals can become Vanilla either through being ignorant of choice-based identity politics or by their deliberate rejection of them (and it is generally assumed that any such rejection is itself a sure sign of ignorance), it is a vicious twist against truly progressive values that some of the most unconventional of political thinkers are increasingly being labeled “mainstream” (as Vanilla) in an attempt to discredit them. Indeed, the meaning of Vanilla Sex has expanded to include not just “archaic” forms of sexual mechanics (the male-dominant missionary position et al.) but the more egalitarian varieties of *relationships* theorized by many radical feminists as well, all of which are increasingly seen as tediously dreary and just a shade away from being beige; optimism and cynicism being oft confused categories these days.

But for older feminists, the Vanilla accusation often carries all the weight of “bigot” and “racist” behind it, the creamy-white implication of the word emphasizing the mythology of whiteness that has been attributed to those commonly referred to as Second Wave. Just as accusations of sexism are made in an atmosphere of racism (making rap and hip-hop artists out as bigger offenders than their peers producing rock music), accusations of racism are also made in an atmosphere of sexism, a sea of hatred for older women ensures that only the feminists least of use to men—Mary Daly comes to mind—will ever meet with such attacks, perpetrated against them most often by women as white as themselves. The pointing out of other racists is a rather facile way of divesting oneself of racial privilege (just as finger waving pro-feminist men cannot help but take advantage of the existence of rape-culture to make themselves look good by way of comparison) but once again, a fictional class of oppressive women is invented.

Even if “Mary Daly vs. Audre Lorde” was an iconic moment in feminism, it was built (and continues to be built) into some sort of postmortem celebrity death-match not by black women but by whites concerned with advancing their own politics and careers, often in stark opposition to ideals that both Daly and Lorde

embraced. That is not to say that intersections of race and sex should go unexamined, far from it, but no matter how white or straight a woman might be, she is still a woman and not a virtual-man—to be considered privileged only for the duration of an argument amongst her peers. As the conceptual groundwork of the anti-Vanilla polemic (which by its very nature needs Vanilla to exist as a concrete entity) is based in choice, one woman’s simple disagreement with another woman can become the exact equivalent of an oppressive act by a man, given that disagreement is invariably read as condescension when one’s sense of agency is at stake. Being that men as a class have a vested interest in women adopting this new definition of agency, and have no material interest in arguing against it, pimps and johns often start to look like magnanimous allies while radical feminists begin to look like fascist overlords; “patronizing” is ironically something only women can ever be in such a climate.

As identity shifts from something that is “overdetermined” in the Marxist sense, that is, a single effect can result from any number of competing causes—some of which might even appear contradictory on a superficial level—to a Gnostic paradigm where any sense of identity begins and ends at the self, allowed to blithely remain indeterminate, the very bedrock that allows for the understanding of the existence of social processes like racism is undercut. This has already happened in the arenas of sex and gender, where women are no longer a class of people but a social fiction (begging the question of who it is exactly that misogynists hate and what it is that certain transsexual or transgender people desire to be) due to deliberate misunderstandings of what “essentialism” actually means. That this erosion has taken place at a slower rate with regards to race has less to do with demonstrable differences between its social construction and that of sex and gender, but because white on white (and male and female on female) accusations of racism frequently make for an effective control tactic against those who would fight against sexism.

The threat of Vanilla, as it is commonly employed in discourse, embraces the existence of sexism and racism by allowing fairly privileged—and thus normative—people the contrivance of “othering” themselves, projecting any personal responsibility for patriarchal culture onto a vanilla-boogeyman that stalks around as the perfect Aryan-misogynist straw man—all while simultaneously injecting other aspects of the domination endured by minority classes into their own relationships as exotic “spice,” the opposite of vanilla, for their own personal amusement and vanity. Objectification has somehow become a progressive ethic.

While many feminist theorists continue to be attacked for essentialism (or “being essentialists,” a phrase that far too few find irony in!), where simplistic analyses of their work allow opportunistic readers to assume that they believe women to be inherently good and men to be bad, such essentialism is actually practiced by those who hold the more Gnostic view of identity. In such circles, “good” and “bad” are merely aspects of popularity and not the ethical choices people make: those who are good are allowed to have and proclaim an off-Vanilla identity and those who are bad—or merely out of favor within the Liberal spectrum of subcultures—are not, regardless of how both sets are situated in objective terms. Good people then become women of a sort and bad people then become men or like men (e.g. “oppressive” radical feminists), at least when it comes to accusations of privilege that are designed purely to silence, not to provoke dialogue or social change.

In that same fashion, good people are granted access to scarcely off-white ethnicities which are then treated as overly meaningful, while the bad are simply white; no matter how many Irish or Welsh ancestors they might have, the same moral reprieve is not granted. The good also become queer, no matter how conventionally married they are or how freshly painted their metaphorical picket fence might be—their own variety of kink, whether it is milque-toast or Saturnalian, is enough to buy their way out from heterosexual privilege. Indeed, the practice of women in heterosexual relationships referring to themselves as “femme” is gaining traction,

even if such an admission (often delivered coyly as some expression of guilt) is completely meaningless politically and serves no useful purpose, other than to separate themselves from the more normative “femmes” who are unable to impose themselves into the debates of lesbians. For the bad—or unpopular—no foible is enough to escape the confines of Vanilla, a sexuality that is subject to constant reminders of its inherent depravity: rapists in male prisons are allowed to preserve their default heterosexual status while same-sex oriented pedophiles are simply pedophiles and never gay men.

While such judgments are largely utilitarian in nature, grounded in necessary apologetics given the dangers of homophobia, they are themselves essentialist for their determinism. More problematic, however, is the privileging of style over substance when it comes to deciding what runs contrary to normative sensibilities. Homosexual interactions that sexualize power and its differentials, no matter how marginalized they might be, are still in line with conventional expectations for intimate relationships and engaging in them is in no way transgressive.

Yet the singular promise of the anti-Vanilla polemic is that of transgression, shifting ever greater quantities of persons into the category of “other” in order to undermine the very idea of normative, the supposed sanctity of Vanilla, when and where it will finally be revealed to the masses that there are few—if any—authentically “straight white men” in existence. This revelation will somehow spark a utopian revolution. Unfortunately, the actual oppression that exists in the real world today requires the work of significantly more active parties: real people who have names that can be named. But through the rhetoric of deconstruction Vanilla itself is made real, both in the frequent sublimation of guilt (as we delve into our minor-victimhood) that works in favor of the status quo, as even the most privileged of men rarely feels fully enfranchised at any given moment, but also in that it is necessary to imagine a host of Vanilla People standing on the outskirts of our own non-Vanilla communities. They are at once a philosophical foil given that Vanilla itself is to be deconstructed at some eventuality, in as much as it is held that no one can possibly ever live up to the rigid standards of such an

iconic identity, while sometimes they are targets of flesh and blood who exist on the periphery of Liberal subcultures to be knocked down for personal ambition.

Those who exist at the center of such communities, whether they are social, academic, or expressly political, are able to further secure their own control over the group through their ability to name: to locate the identities of others closer or further away from the core ideals of the community. This results in a deliberate reframing of normative which is no longer informed by historical precedent but by vagary and interpersonal competition at the lowest level. One conciliatory gesture in interactions of this sort is inevitably a form of “It’s all right, Sweetie, Vanilla is another flavor, after all,” which is actually a cleverly designed admonition, daring the target—testing her limits and the extent of the accuser’s own authority, just as in traditional sadomasochistic “play”—to masochistically accept the unflattering reevaluation of her identity or be even further removed from the community as a whole. Accusers, on the other hand, find their own identity and position in their group strengthened by this process of topping a victim.

The Vanilla model allows those with at least some form of power over those who are more or less their peers the ability to disguise that control through the pretense of their own alterity, as they pick and choose whose individual peculiarities warrant them being an oppressor or oppressed, even if people on both sides of the line are identically situated in quantitative terms. If being a straight white man is truly the hardest thing in the world to achieve, as it is posited by deconstructionists of all stripes, then it is the multitude of *nearly* straight white men who benefit most from this imagining of Vanilla. If the failure to perfectly realize the role is acceptable grounds for narcissistic victimhood, then there is no reason to truly reject the role or the system that compels it. As long as males are willing to escape into a myriad of identities sanctioned by patriarchy and allow themselves to duel endlessly over such minutiae (“primary” male-to-female transsexuals vs. “secondary” vs. “mere transvestites;” queers vs. metrosexuals; geeks vs. nerds; etc.) there can be no pro-feminist movement for our part.

Such decency is precluded by Vanilla rhetoric as it aligns decency with masochism: as admissions of privilege—and worse, admissions of being knowingly complicit in that privilege—are the only allowable evidence of that condition of privilege, those willing to make such an acknowledgment are beholden to (and thus are “topped” by) those who are unwilling to do so, even if the other party is guilty of the same or worse. In that sense, if heterosexuality, whether it is viewed as an institution or an event-process, is to be forever linked with patriarchy, systems of domination, and—somehow even more irrationally terrifying—bourgeois sensibilities, only the most honest and decent are going to bear the brunt of such criticism, existing as privileged heterosexuals, while plenty of penises and vaginas will continue to come into contact with each other amongst the pansexual, just-sexual, and the self-avowed pervert populations that continue to indulge in hierarchy as a fetish.

Any framework that encourages people to lie to each other, and to themselves, cannot by its very nature be transgressive. Palliative fiction never is. The myth of Vanilla cobbles together the words of revolution just to give them one final twist, assembling them with the very legacies of racism and sexism they were meant to dispel. If there are 32 flavors (or more) of “white” or “male” it is the height of arrogance to presume that a full 31 of them are reserved for those one considers friends, deeming anyone else to be Vanilla. And given the historic connotations of the word, not only is this a semantic threat that no white or accepted-male-at-birth person has any right to be making, it is a highly hypocritical one given that it is most often delivered against one’s actual peers. Too much success with that makes one bold, however, and now even minority communities are subject to these Vanilla accusations—hurled by those more white and more male than not, who have fantasized about stealing, buying, or colonizing their own way into a more flavorful existence and a new group of peers of their choice: the true identity of such colonizers, however, is readily revealed by their behavior the second one of their new “peers” takes issue with their presence. That “peer,” taking issue with the privilege of the accuser, is then temporarily elevated in class for the duration of the argument into Vanilla, this millennium’s version of The Man.