

Dehumanization and the Sculpting of Rigid Identities in Carrillo's "And When You Leave, Take
Your Pictures With You."

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Hum 103-104
October 4, 2019

Upon my first reading of Jo Carrillo's "And When You Leave, Take Your Pictures With You,"¹ I under-analyzed the text. The short poem extrinsically appeared to me as a relatively simplistic display of rigid identities being sculpted by white people for women of color. On the first several reads through, I failed to recognize the depth and complexity elicited by Carrillo's words. Countless small group discussions and lectures marginally added to my understanding of the poem, but there remained segments of the poem that I couldn't connect to the rest of the text. Namely, I couldn't grasp why Carrillo repeatedly included the detail of women of color's children "reading books from literacy campaigns."² Why was this detail incorporated in a passage about degrading, constricting identities? Why does this concept exist in the same stanza as machine guns, bayonets, bombs and knives? Literacy campaigns seemed inherently constructive to me which contrasted the other destructive themes. Moreover, there is a noticeable shift in the portrayal of women of color from the first stanza to the second stanza; the first barbarizes them whereas the second romanticizes them. What caused this shift in the white women's attitudes towards women of color?

To assist my perception of the repeated usage of literacy campaigns as a motif and the incongruity of themes between the first and second stanza, I chose an excerpt from Denis Diderot's *Natural Law*³ as my engaging text. The specific section is his fourth natural law, which focuses on the distinction of man from animal and the power of reason. Diderot claims that "we

¹ Carrillo, Jo. "And When You Leave, Take Your Pictures with You." Vancouver, B.C.: Lazara Publications, 1982.

² Carrillo, 36.

³ Diderot, Denis, Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, and Henry C. Clark. *Encyclopedic Liberty: Political Articles in the Dictionary of Diderot and D'Alembert*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 2016.

must apply reason in all matters because man is not only an animal but an animal who reasons,”⁴ and anyone who denounces the truth and their reasoning abilities ought to be “treated by the rest of his species as a wild beast.”⁵ By using Diderot’s passage to form a lens on Carrillo’s poem, this essay has two facets to aid my comprehension of the texts. Primarily, using the lens constructed from Diderot’s text, I explore the significance of literacy campaigns in the context of oppression and identity construction. Understanding this significance, in turn, illuminates the poem in its entirety, explicating the switch in how Carrillo portrays women of color and fulfilling the second facet of this essay.

Diderot’s passage has several implications that, as I will explain in the succeeding paragraphs, illuminate Carrillo’s passage. The first is that reason defines man. The actual definition of ‘reason’ is somewhat flimsy and easily susceptible to attack. It’s from this minutiae that problems spawn. Who decides if someone is using reason? What qualifies someone as reasonable? During Professor Quillen’s lecture on Sept. 5, Quillen discussed how Diderot’s work has a massive liberating power while also possessing the power to subjugate others on the basis that certain groups allegedly don’t use reason. This relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor permits the oppressor to deem a group as unreasonable, enabling the oppressing group to justifiably subjugate the oppressed group. Using Diderot’s reasoning, colonization, marginalization, and other forms of oppression are justifiable if a group is deemed unreasonable and in need of ‘purification’ or ‘enlightening.’

⁴ Diderot, 36.

⁵ Diderot, 36.

The second implication of Diderot's passage is the portion that labels people who don't reason as "wild beasts" and "mad or evil." In concurrence with the first implication I pointed to, a group that is deemed unreasonable is therefore beastly, mad, or evil. It is the defining characteristic of man to reason, and, therefore, a group that doesn't reason can be degraded to a subhuman level, enabling oppression and so-called 'purification.'

Reflecting back upon Carrillo's passage, literacy campaigns can be painted as a darker image than I had originally thought. Upon my first reading of the passage, I considered the addition of the emphasis upon literacy campaigns as just reinforcing a strictly structured identity of being from a third world country. From my own privileged, white, male perspective, those in third world countries need the assistance of the great first world countries. From the same perspective, it's not offensive or degrading to attempt to help those in need. To me, it just seemed as if Carrillo was adding this detail to fortify the stereotype of being from a third world country. This assumption of it being just and morally sound to make these attempts at assistance made it difficult for me to contextualize Carrillo's contempt towards literacy campaigns. Now, synthesizing the difficult passage with the enlightening passage, Carrillo's emphasis on literacy campaigns is illuminated by Diderot's description of reason. Literacy campaigns are intended to instill knowledge, or reason, in areas or to groups judged as devoid of knowledge and unreasonable. In turn, this also means that the oppressing group - white women - have deemed the oppressed group - women of color - as subhuman and in need of enlightenment from the oppressing group. This structured reasoning, however immoral and wrong, creates a logical support mechanism for justifying the unfair treatment of a group as long as it falls under the

ambiguous umbrella of providing assistance. Incorporating literacy campaigns, in Carrillo's terms, is the vessel by which oppression can be inflicted upon a group.

Understanding Carrillo's emphasis on literacy campaigns sheds light onto the contrast between the first and second stanza. In the first stanza, Carrillo's language in the description of women of color presents them as threatening. She characterizes women of color by putting them in the presence of "machine guns bayonets bombs knives" and "wielding... machete[s]." ⁶ Contrarily, the second stanza aestheticizes and romanticizes women of color, clothing them in "bright embroidered shirts" and seeing them "smiling."⁷ I see literacy campaigns serving as an internal link between the two stanzas despite their differing themes. The first stanza presents a group before or in the early stages of white subjugation at which point the group has been deemed devoid of reason. Literacy campaigns are introduced both textually and in this hypothetical to 'instill reason' into the group. Then, as a result of the efforts to 'instill reason,' the group is now romanticized as a beautiful, developing population and given characteristics that fit the standard identity that the oppressing group has cultivated for them. Carrillo refutes this colonial attitude, insisting that "No one smiles/ at the beginning of a day spent / digging for souvenir chunks of uranium" or "cleaning up after / our white sisters."⁸

Carrillo's poem, with the illumination from Diderot's Natural Law, signifies how women of color are treated as subhuman ornamental "beasts." The inclusion of literacy campaigns reinforces the rigid identity that is created by white women for women of color, an identity of a subordinate and inferior intellect. Understanding the impact that this detail has illuminates the

⁶ Carrillo, 63.

⁷ Carrillo, 63.

⁸ Carrillo, 63.

rest of the poem as a whole, providing an explanation for the shift in themes from the first stanza to the second. The adjacency of these two facets works to sculpt a detailed image of the process of oppression and colonization.

Works Cited

Carrillo, Jo. *And When You Leave, Take Your Pictures with You*. Vancouver, B.C.: Lazara Publications, 1982.

Diderot, Denis, Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, and Henry C. Clark. *Encyclopedic Liberty: Political Articles in the Dictionary of Diderot and D'Alembert*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 2016.