

***Fearful Beloved* by Khadijah Queen** **Argos Books, 2015**

reviewed by Ana Paula

In *Fearful Beloved*, through her use of a modern architectural structure, Khadijah Queen is able to move through the spaces of the public and private — as well as the personal and political — seamlessly. The result is a cartography of black female subjectivity that, by troubling lexicons of fear and agency, proves violence is anything but exceptional. Written on occasion of Ann Hamilton's Park Avenue Armory installation, the book is a house held together by its main series of poems: letters to fear.

Alternating between the use of first person (implying personal experience) and the spectatorial third (addressing systemic violence), the intimacy of the epistolary form provides a strong counterpoint to the broader critique. Body here might be the locus of violence, but the structure in which the poems are organized suggests a larger topic, one that is structural.

Dear fear,

some fears exist in space, not in the body in some
bodies
you are not learned, but I learned so much about you I
could never have
loved you I have careened into that knowledge like a real
person

Instead of the classic *mise-en-scène* in which the domestic scene configures the departure point of the Oedipal male

character who abandons the sphere of his childhood for the outside world, in Queen's architecture the inside and the outside, the public and the private, alternate and complement each other. This work of modern architecture is experiential as opposed to static, with multiple scenes occurring simultaneously in different rooms, each with a window opening up to a unique view.¹

Queen's penchant for poetic erasure ("I write across the white") makes the political critique self-evident, as does the book's title, an inter-textual gesturing towards Toni Morrison's *Beloved* which seems far from coincidental.

Many poems have "room" in their titles, while others contain names of cities and tell stories of insidious violence against women. In the city poems, the content of the sentences narrates scenes in which the gaze is masculine and the prey is feminine:

his aperture turned pornographic,
a demanding crawlspac

Structurally, there is something else happening: Queen, writing the text primarily from the perspective of a female character, renders the men in flat, purely descriptive images, from "midwestern, tongue-ringed baltimore" to "the one with the tattoo of a cross on his back & lion on his chest." Those photographic descriptions unsurprisingly show up in the poems whose titles are named after locations: "Louisiana," "Manhattan," "Prague." The men's constructions, too, are all

¹ "To enter is to see. But not to see a static object, a building, a fixed place. Rather, architecture taking place in history, the events of architecture, architecture as an event. It is not so much that you enter architecture as that you see architecture's entrance. The elements of modern architecture (pilotis, horizontal window, the roof garden, the glass facade) are seen being 'born' in front of your eyes. And in so doing they make these eyes 'modern'" (Colomina 5).

surface. The modernist concept of ornament is employed and men are seen photographically, if not pornographically.^{2 3}

The concept of capture then, is turned upside down, working twofold. The etymology of photography says so much: to *capture*, to *shoot*. The gaze here is violent. Arresting the image, the narrator's gaze reinvests the previous position: she is no longer the looked-upon one, but the looker.

None of this, however, is binary as there is no lack of subtlety in Queen's artifice. The ones who see are also the ones being seen: there is no simplicity in inverting the gaze, as the female characters are also described using ornaments, if briefly. The point of view is never static. This resistance of dominance is not as simple as women resisting men. The insidious violence that the narrator is both subjected to and subjects herself to escapes the lexicons of resistance and agency so often present in black feminist critique, or any opposition between "oppressed" and "oppressor." Like Alexander G. Weheliye in his *Habeas Viscus*, Queen constantly asks: *What deformations of freedom become possible in the absence of resistance and agency?*^{4 5}

² "It is perhaps for that reason that Loos insists, in a passage also mysteriously omitted from the English translation of his famous text 'Architektur,' that the interior is that which cannot be photographed: 'The inhabitants of my interiors do not recognize their own houses in photographs.' The interior is disguised by the photograph" (Colomina 5).

³ "On the public side of the wall another language was spoken, the masking language of information. On the other side lay the unspeakable. But this unspeakable domain beyond the public is also beyond the private" (Colomina 28).

⁴ "Nonetheless, genres of the human I discuss in *Habeas Viscus* ought not to be understood within the lexicons of resistance and agency, because, as explanatory tools, these concepts have a tendency to blind us, whether through strenuous denials or exalted celebrations of their existence, to the manifold occurrences of freedom in zones of indistinction" (G. Weheliye 2).

⁵ "When I initially began thinking about this book I wondered about

How to expand the far too limited lexicons of agency?

Ask a woman who has had her nipple bitten off if she liked it. (...)

Ask her if even after it heals, she finds those same white teeth irresistible.

Queen doesn't believe in the stability of subalternity status; rather, she acknowledges the violences while affording the ones who suffer it an unstable role. Her narrator creates a complex portrayal of violence both imposed upon and wrought by her, wherein the fear is not only of others but also of herself. Around halfway through the book, the shifting of her aperture becomes more explicit: she starts looking inwards, vulnerable. If the topography of femininity has been built to represent mystery, Queen has destroyed that and offered something intimate instead. The locus of fear becomes intimacy, and the subject of fear is herself. She fears deliverance. Zeroing in on herself instead of others, in the private space of the domestic household she is anything but flat; her emotions are complex and developed.

Masks, albeit a modernist device, are also used to sustain strands of misogyny and patriarchy, forces that through specific properties have conjured a topography of women as abstraction. The critique is evident through Queen's choice to interlope those scenes with others in which performativity, as a concept and as a term, is key. This is self-evident in the poems' titles: "performance," "Performance: Inscript," "Performer:

the very basic possibility of agency and/or resistance in extreme circumstances such as slave plantations or concentration camps. The initial inquiry, then, led me to broader methodological questions facing minority discourse: hegemony and/or exhibit the full agency of the oppressed? What deformations of freedom become possible in the absence of resistance and agency?" (G. Weheliye 2).

Extended Womb,” and “Performer: Storm.”

Through self-examination, the voice continues in a more optimistic, less fearful tone:

What I've found will never leave me, but you will
that comforts me, strengthens I hadn't known I could
live
or love without you — I hadn't know how much better

If architecture is the overlapping of representations, here Queen moves both outward and inward until she reaches a point where there's no longer any distinction. There is a constant feeling of motion to these poems, even as they exist within structural constraints. It works because the point of view of modern architecture is never fixed, as in baroque architecture or in the camera obscura, but always in motion, as in a film or in the city.⁶

By the end, there's also an emotional shift:

the girl checks herself for emotional seepage
confused inside with outside

Inside and outside conflate: If the separate spheres of public and private comprise the beginning of the book, by its end space has undergone a transformation by which those spheres have merged into one unified, indistinguishable field.

As a prose writer whose talents are heightened by the

⁶ “Crowds, shoppers in a department store, railroad travelers, and the inhabitants of Le Corbusier's houses have in common with the movie viewers that they cannot fix (arrest) the image. Like the movie viewer that Benjamin describes (“no sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed”), they inhabit a space that is neither inside nor outside, public nor private (in the traditional understanding of these terms)” (Colomina 5).

self-imposed architectural constraints of more closed genres (playwriting and nonfiction, for instance), even while writing poetry Queen constructs a carefully linear structure which, eventually, arrives at a satisfying formal unity. The female character reaches triumph. “What about the present?” the voice asks. “I estimate there is no room for you there.”

Works Cited

- Queen, Khadijah. *Fearful Beloved*. Argos Books, 2015.
- Colomina, Beatriz. *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media*. MIT Press, 1994.
- G. Weheliye, Alexander. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Duke University Press, 2014.