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“Leaving me unsure of my own eyes:” Scopophilia and Racial Entitlement in Valerie Martin’s “Property”

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Abstract

In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey contends that the film spectators using a male gaze engage in two different activities. On the one hand, they voyeuristically enjoy a character —– usually a woman —– being punished and controlled. On the other hand, they derive narcissistic pleasure from identifying with someone onscreen, often the central male protagonist. In her novel *Property*, Valerie Martin employs similar scopophilic elements to construct the subjectivity of Manon, a white woman slaveholder in the antebellum South. Whereas the spyglass represents Manon's tendency to derive power from voyeurism, the mirror is a manifestation of her narcissism in perceiving Sarah —– her black servant —– as her double image. However, unlike the film spectator whose scopophilic tendency is encouraged by traditional Hollywood cinema, Manon finds her vision subverted, shattered, and even turned against her. By examining the way scopophilia functions in *Property*, this paper argues that the destruction of Manon's scopophilic fantasy exposes and condemns her white supremacy. Since Manon's racial entitlement enables her fantasy, the collapse of her perverted worldview implies that the gaze conceptualized by Mulvey is not necessarily a male gaze, but that can be a lesbian/female gaze in any relationship of domination and exploitation.

Keywords: Valerie Martin, Laura Mulvey, Female Gaze, Antebellum

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In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey contends that the film spectators using a male gaze engage in two different activities. On the one hand, they voyeuristically enjoy a character — usually a woman — being punished and controlled. On the other hand, they derive narcissistic pleasure from identifying with someone onscreen, often the central male protagonist. In her novel *Property*, Valerie Martin employs similar scopophilic elements to construct the subjectivity of Manon, a white woman slaveholder in the antebellum South. Whereas the spyglass represents Manon’s tendency to derive power from voyeurism, the mirror is a manifestation of her narcissism in perceiving Sarah — her black servant — as her double image. However, unlike the film spectator whose scopophilic tendency is encouraged by traditional Hollywood cinema, Manon finds her vision subverted, shattered, and even turned against her. By examining the way scopophilia functions in *Property*, this paper argues that the destruction of Manon’s scopophilic fantasy exposes and condemns her white supremacy. Since Manon’s racial entitlement enables her fantasy, the collapse of her perverted worldview implies that the gaze conceptualized by Mulvey is not necessarily a male gaze, but that can be a lesbian/female gaze in any relationship of domination and exploitation.

In her essay, Mulvey uses Lacanian psychoanalysis to explain the way classical Hollywood films employ the male gaze. According to Lacan, women’s lack is important in structuring the symbolic order because it gives meaning to the phallus in a binary relationship. Mulvey discusses how the male gaze always posits the audience as a man looking at women. Since the women’s lack represents the fear of castration, the film has two ways to deal with it: 1) by positing women as erotic objects, using the narrative to punish or somehow reclaim the

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women, or 2) by making the audience identify with the man, who fetishizes the women and thus negates the fear. Mulvey explains that the first scopophilic activity "arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight" (1175). Traditionally, women connote "to-be-looked-at-ness:" they are both looked at and displayed, functioning as "erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium" (1176). This voyeuristic pleasure is associated with sadism: "pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt (immediately associated with castration), asserting control of subjugating the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness" (1177). Sadism functions well within a narrative, where events transpire and lead to the punishment of the women.

In *Property*, the voyeuristic side of scopophilia manifests in Manon's gratification from witnessing slaves subjected to violence and degradation. Addressing the power derived from voyeurism, Stephanie Li comments that: "Manon's gaze is the most significant power she has" (245). Li discusses the scene where Manon watches through a spyglass as her husband and slave master, Gaudet, forces the naked enslaved boys to huddle onto a swinging rope and drop themselves into the water. Gaudet later beats the boys until one of the boys becomes sexually aroused. As he punishes them for this act, Gaudet takes pleasure in proving that they are nothing but mindless brutes. Li observes that Manon watches "not to discover what will happen next but because she wants to see the brutal scene unfold" (245). The erotic descriptions of the slaves expose Manon's desire to sexualize the boys and the violence inflicted upon them: "The boys rub against each other; they can't help it. Their limbs become entwined, they struggled to hang on, and it isn't long before one comes out of the water with his member raised" (Martin 10). Since Manon is the narrator and we look at things from her point of view, the scene

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conveys an unaddressed sexual aspect underlying Manon's observation of the brutality. Moreover, like a spectator watching a film, Manon enjoys the show at a safe distance, maintaining "a separation of the erotic identity of the subject from the object on the screen" (Mulvey 1175). While Manon is disgusted by Gaudet, who finds sexual arousal in violence she is complicit through her act of voyeurism. Later in the novel, Manon exhibits sadistic pleasure when she learns to make this degradation her own by sexually assaulting Sarah. As Manon sucks at Sarah's breast, she imagines herself being viewed by others: "Manon wants her perversity to be seen, as if by having witnesses to her attack on Sarah she will gain new power and shed the confines of her social position" (Li 250). It is Manon's position as a white woman that enables her to construct the fantasy and enact it in real life.

One aspect Li neglects to elaborate in her discussion is the way Manon is eventually pushed into the role of a victim of stalking who is deprived of power and security. While an audience can voyeuristically enjoy the subjugation of female characters from the other side of the screen, Manon is vulnerable to the subversion of power every time she is being viewed by the enslaved subjects. In the novel, voyeurism works both ways. It is how the masters perceive the slaves, but it is also how the slaves regain power from the masters and expose the latter's insecurity. Concerning Manon's vulnerability, Li briefly discusses it by pointing out: "Manon is only made guilty when Sarah looks at her" (246). As Manon nurses Sarah's breast, she reflects the way Sarah's gaze repels her because, "Just as Sarah's gaze indicted Manon for looking at the fighting slave boys, her gaze here would affirm the white woman's guilt and perversity" (Li 251). This argument can be further complicated when we consider that in the progression of the

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novel, the threat of the black gaze becomes something much more sinister to Manon as she confronts the possibility of the slave's uprisings.

Despite multiple indications of the upcoming insurgents, Manon is woefully disconnected from the reality of a slave rebellion. She repeatedly dismisses the risk and smugly entertains the thought as she looks out from the window: "I don't see any signs of an uprising out here" (Martin 79). Nonetheless, every time the idea of slave rebellion penetrates Manon's sense of entitlement and self-satisfaction, the moment is linked to her fear of becoming the subject of another's gaze. This brings us back to the scene where Manon catches sight of a black man from the window in the middle of the night: "a negro dressed in a white shirt and loose breeches that whipped around in the wind" (30). The presence of the man deeply troubles Manon not only because he signifies the possibility of a revolt, but also because his pointed gaze -- "He was standing very still, his arms crossed, gazing up at the house" -- recalls her fear of being detected, or of having her gaze returned (30). This moment of fright is reminiscent of the scene where Manon wakes up at night, only to discover Sarah, with "her wide eyes watching me, and I thought, She has been watching me like that this entire night" (18). While Manon derives perverse delectation from witnessing the suffering and humiliation of the enslaved subjects, their gazes elicit terror from her because she cannot comprehend their intentions the same way she cannot read Sarah's expressions, whose emotions are off-limits to Manon.

The threat of the black's gaze is intensified when Manon visits her mother's house, where she catches the whispering between a man and a woman in the middle of the night. Unable to locate the source of the voices, Manon first believes that she was driven insane.

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While there is no confirmation that the character is being watched by whoever is conversing in the dark, the eerie scene denotes the feeling of being closely observed: “One voice, then another, then a pause. I turned onto my back and lay still, listening. There was nothing… I closed my eyes. At once the whispering began again… I slipped out of the bed and knelt on the bare floor. The voice stopped; there was no answer” (Martin 73). That the voices cease every time Manon opens her eyes or when she attempts to locate the source of the noise evokes dread and apprehension. This moment depicts Manon as someone who might be observed but is made helpless by the fact she cannot pinpoint whoever is speaking or watching her.

Manon’s terror-induced paranoia is replicated and intensified during the night when Gaudet’s house is taken over by black insurgents. At this point, Manon feels with more certainty that she is being watched: “High against the jamb, the upper part of a black face with only one eye showing peered in at me. In the same moment I saw it, it slipped away, leaving me unsure of my own eyes” (Martin 80). Despite being discovered, the eye only disappears for a moment before returning to peering at her in the dark: “When I looked back at the doorway, there was the single eye again, watching me” (80). Whoever is staring at Manon is not disturbed by or afraid of her presence. Rather the gaze of the black individual almost paralyzes Manon and renders her powerless, transforming her into the target of voyeurism who no longer occupies a position to reject or return the gaze. There is an uncanny inversion as the roles are reversed. Whereas Manon, a white woman, once derived power from witnessing slaves subjected to violence and humiliation and fantasizes about being watched as she sexually dominates her black slave, now Manon must surrender her power to the black insurgent who has invaded her home and brazenly returns her gaze. Like the slave boys whom she spied

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through the glass, Manon is at the mercy of a voyeur. Manon's home, where she can perform the white gaze to assert power over the enslaved, is now made uncanny by the reversal of roles: the black voyeur subverts the power of the white and becomes her horrifying inversion.

The slaves' revolt in many ways destroys and reshapes the way Manon sees herself and black slaves. After returning from the forest, where she has been hunted down by black rebels, Manon comes home to discover: "The spyglass was dismantled and lay in pieces on the carpet, there were the gashes in the dining table, a curtain down, a mirror shattered so that only glass splinters remained in the frame" (Martin 100). The spyglass has been used by Manon to voyeuristically engage in the suffering of slaves: It has secured her a safe and privileged position where she assumes absolute power to watch and savor the debasement of black subjects, and where she is insusceptible to the power of the black gaze. At the same time, the novel demonstrates that Manon's constructed worldview shatters and collapses as she becomes the target of voyeurism. This separates the ways the gaze operates within a story screen and in reality. Whereas a film spectator can openly derive voyeuristic satisfaction from watching women being shamed and mastered on-screen, the screen through which Manon indulges her sadistic gratification is the construct of her subjective world. The damage to Manon's spyglass, brought about by the people who she perceives as inferior, embodies her failed fantasy of voyeurism as well as the reality of her racial entitlement. Manon now has to confront a world where the power she gains from voyeurism is subverted and turned against her.

Whereas the spyglass represents the voyeuristic side of scopophilia, the mirror in *Property* is an object of narcissism and is associated with the constitution of the ego. The shattered mirror symbolizes another significant way Manon sees herself and others, for it

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represents her relationship with Sarah, who Manon once believes to be her double. According to Laura Mulvey, the narcissistic aspect of scopophilia "demands identification of the ego with the object on the screen through the spectator's fascination with and recognition of his like" (1175). Since men are reluctant to be sexually objectified, the audience is encouraged to identify with the central male protagonists — the active figures who advance the story and control the film fantasy. As this identification occurs, "the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence" (1176). Whereas the women are erotic objects, the male characters become "the more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego conceived in the original moment of recognition in front of the mirror." This narcissistic aspect explains how Manon perceives Sarah as her doppelganger, but Manon's perception is further complicated by the fact that she filters the image of Sarah through both the spyglass and the mirror, thereby demonstrating that she considers Sarah as simultaneously the erotic object and the ideal ego.

In Freud's "The Uncanny," doubles refer to people "who are to be considered identical by reason of looking alike… one possesses knowledge, feeling and experience in common with the other, identifies himself with another person… similar situations, a same face, or character-trait, or twist of fortune, or a same crime, or even a same name recurring throughout several consecutive generations" (9). In the progression of the novel before the insurrection, Manon continuously sees Sarah as her double and strongly wants to perceive a connection between her and Sarah. She tries to make conversations with her servant, guesses her emotions, predicts the meaning of her expressions, and even adopts Sarah's mannerisms to annoy her husband: "This unnerves him. It's a trick I learned from Sarah" (Martin 13). Despite her resentment at her

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husband's infidelity, Manon seems to have a grudging respect for Sarah, admitting that: "on those occasions when she bothers to speak, she [Sarah] makes sense." More importantly, Manon is pleased that Sarah and she share intense hatred and resentment towards Gaudet, as she confesses to Dr. Sanchez: "And this one [Sarah] suits me. She hates him [Gaudet] as much as I do" (35). From Manon's viewpoint, Sarah and she are united on the same front, trapped in the same circumstances: they are both subjected to Gaudet's patriarchal domination; neither wants to have sex with him, but neither can accuse him of rape.

The complex way Manon perceives Sarah is best characterized by the scene where Manon watches Sarah in the mirror while the latter brushes her hair. Manon closely observes Sarah through the mirror, noting the details of Sarah's face and hands: "I looked at her reflection, her face intent on the task, a few drops of moisture on her forehead… I watched her long fingers smoothing back the waves at my temples; she watched her hands too, looking for any gray hairs to pull out" (Martin 16). On the one hand, this is not the first or the only time Manon's voyeuristic streak manifests itself. Manon's sexual craving for Sarah is exposed because Sarah is the only person Manon gazes at so attentively. When Manon's home is attacked, she witnesses Sarah running from Gaudet's room and cannot help but observe: "Her hair was all undone, her eyes bright, she was wearing a loose dressing gown I'd never seen before" (Martin 42). Manon tends to describe in detail the way Sarah looks, and this is the kind of attention that she has never given Gaudet, her own husband. The mirror now functions as a glass material where Manon can justify her intense voyeuristic observation of her servant. On the other hand, it can be understood as the manifestation of Manon's narcissism and her reliance on Sarah in constituting her ego. While their reflections are side by side, Manon is

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occupied with Sarah's image rather than her own, reinforcing the idea that they are two of the same person. According to Mulvey, the scopophilia rooted in voyeurism and the one stemming from narcissism, though different and contradictory, can function in the same text: "This tension and the shift from one pole to the other can structure a single text" (1177). Manon sees Sarah not only through the mirror as a double, but also looks at Sarah with the voyeuristic intents that rely on the vision of a spyglass: Sarah is the person who Manon perceives as her own reflection, but also the one who she wants to possess and subdue.

The notion of Manon and Sarah functioning as uncanny reflections of one another is also evident in Martin's focus on bodily fluids, in particular milk, which is closely associated with Sarah, a mother who has to feed her own infant. Manon sucking on Sarah's breast has to do with her attraction with Sarah as much as the death of Manon's mother, which prompts Manon to assert dominance over Sarah to indulge in her desire to cope with the sudden gap in her life now that the support from her mother is gone. The novel highlights the uncanny inversion by depicting black fluids oozing from Manon's mother's white body while white milk coming from Sarah's black breast. After being stained by black fluids, Manon grapples for balance by seeking Sarah and becomes entranced by the "white drop formed at her nipple," a direct contradiction with the decay of her mother's corpse (Martin 59). To counter the black invasion of her mother's body, Manon dominates the black body and replaces the black fluid of death with the nurturing white milk, attempting to re-establish her identity as a daughter and as a white woman.

Sarah being positioned as Manon's mother also recalls the Lacanian idea of the mother as the child's first mirror. When the mirror stage occurs, we "literally see ourselves in a mirror

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while metaphorically seeing ourselves in our mother's image" (Bressler 134). By observing these images, we come to recognize ourselves as "independent beings who are separate from our mothers" (Bressler 134). At the same time, we see our mothers and whoever we project onto as an ideal self and yearn to become this complete and unified ego. Even when we recognize ourselves as separate entities and find the desire to become a total unity illusory, we still long for our mothers. In relation to the Lacanian mirror stage, Mulvey makes the case that the screen is reminiscent of the mirror in that it "has structures of fascination strong enough to allow temporary loss of ego while simultaneously reinforcing it" (1175). Immersing ourselves in the fantasy world of films and forgetting the ego "is nostalgically reminiscent of that pre-subjective moment of image recognition" (Mulvey 1175). In the scene where Manon nurses Sarah's breast, Sarah becomes Manon's mirror image insofar as she functions as Manon's mother. Manon's inability to ascertain whether it is she or Sarah who sighs with pleasure also indicates, "Manon's longing for her servant and a desire for fusion" (Li 250). The fact that Manon is likely to have a black wet-nurse as a child also reinforces the idea of Manon reverting to the mirror stage -- the moment the child yearns for her mother figure, who she misrecognized as the ideal self.

It is unlikely, however, that Sarah sees herself as Manon's double. Manon's view of Sarah only goes so far as she can project her feelings and perception onto her servant. This is particularly true when she sucks on Sarah's breast, thinking: "I closed my eyes, swallowing greedily. I was aware of a sound, a sigh, but I was not sure if it came from me or from Sarah" (Martin 60). Manon's projection on Sarah is complete as she does not only dominate Sarah through an act of rape, but also interprets Sarah's body entirely in the way that she desires.

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Knowing that Sarah's gaze might condemn her or affirm her guilt, Manon considers the physical abuse she would inflict on Sarah if her servant resisted her sexual violation: "She's afraid to look at me, I thought. And she's right to be. If she looked at me, I would slap her" (60). There are many possible explanations for why Sarah refuses to look at Manon, but like any other time in the novel, we never get to know what Sarah is truly feeling or thinking because her character is always filtered through Manon's skewed perspective. It is only after Sarah flees from the estate that Manon admits she does not understand Sarah at all: she cannot comprehend why Sarah wants to run away after Gaudet is dead. As Manon tries to reach a horse so that she can escape the insurgents, she is met with Sarah's surprisingly violent resistance: "She turned on me in a fury, tearing at my face with her free hand, her sharp nails digging into my already wounded cheek" (86). Sarah's attack on Manon's face recalls Manon's intense observation of both herself and Sarah as Manon watches Sarah brushing her hair. Sarah tearing at her face destroys Manon's illusion of a self-image that she believes is somehow reflective of Sarah. Just as Sarah refusing to look through the spyglass "is a rejection of both the master's vision and his tools", Sarah's assault on Manon's face is a rejection of being seen as Manon's double (Li 246).

The illusion that the characters are doubles is also shattered when Manon runs into the woods, finding herself surrounded by insects: "Insects flew into my mouth and eyes, buzzing louder and louder until I couldn't hear anything else" (Martin 87). This is not the first time Manon's space is being invaded by insects. It also occurs when she orders Sarah to kill a fly "landing on the mirror and crawling over our reflection" because she wants to keep their reflection clear and defined (16). The insects now flying into Manon's eyes signifies the

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breakdown of her worldview: the way she perceives herself and Sarah is no longer clear, and as the truth dawns on her, Manon realizes she cannot see at all.

Ironically, after the revolt, Manon and Sarah continue to function as inverted reflections, even though Manon has been disillusioned with such a view. The uncanniness is expressed in the fact that both women escape by disguising themselves as their opposite. As Manon is hunted down by insurgents, she is forced to smear mud all over her face the way she saw the black slaves had done. The next morning, Manon finds herself looking "at a black hand", which is her own but for a moment it becomes unrecognizable even to herself (Martin 88). Despite Sarah's rejection of them being mirror images, Manon covering herself with mud to look black is an inversion of Sarah dressing like a white to avoid capture. What leads Manon to see through Sarah's ploy is the mannerism and eye contact she observes from the shoemaker, Mr. Gaston:

> As I thanked him for his kind words, he lowered his eyes, then raised them again, and with a slow smile inquired how he might be of service to me. Something in his manner, perhaps it was only the irritating lack of deference, reminded me of Sarah. We discussed my shoes and parted agreeably. When I was on the street, I thought of how he had lowered his eyes modestly, then the suddenness of his redirected gaze (Martin 114).

The white man's lack of deference reminds Manon of the way Sarah has behaved. This is how Manon initially recognizes the possibility that Sarah disguises herself as Mr. Roget, a white man, though later Manon claims that the reason for her suspicion comes from the observation that a sick man would have brought a boy with him instead of traveling with a woman and a baby. Just as Manon becomes unrecognizable to herself, and even to Delphine, who asks "Is

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that you, missus?" when Manon returns home after the night of insurrection, Sarah becomes indistinguishable from white subjects by acting like "a presentable gentleman," a role Sarah plays so well that according to Manon's aunt, "Everyone Mr. Leggett interviewed remarked on his aristocratic manner" (Martin 135). That Sarah presents herself as a male also mirrors Manon's desire to embrace masculine qualities and claim the patriarchal power for herself. This craving manifests in the scene where Manon nurses Sarah's breasts while recalling her husband: "This is what he does, I thought" (60). The scene is framed as a sexual assault tinctured with homoeroticism. Regarding Manon's exploitation of Sarah's body, Amy King writes:

> Becoming voyeur to her own actions gives Manon stereotypically masculine qualities, for she now watches herself just as her husband watches the adolescent slaves during the perverse games he constructs for the purpose of inflicting sexual shame to assert his own authority. While Manon observes these games with disgust through her spyglass at the beginning of the novel… she makes the masculine master's rights of sexual exploitation and voyeurism her own during the nursing scene (225).

From Manon's point of view, Sarah has experienced what she, a white woman, never has: "She [Sarah] has traveled about the country as a free white man" (Martin 137). This is, however, only Manon's projection of her feelings and desire onto Sarah, who likely never feels relieved or relishes in the taste of freedom during her journey through the South. Manon's pursuit of Sarah is "one way of affirming her racial entitlements though she will never have the sexual and gendered freedoms of a man" (Li 253). It is also a way Manon reestablishes their identities as doubles, by continuing to project her feelings onto Sarah and remind her servant of

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their shared circumstances: “He [Walter]’s as much your responsibility as mine” (Martin 139). Despite Manon’s resentment and disgust towards Walter, the bastard son of Gaudet and Sarah, the boy is their connection to what she considers to be Manon’s and Sarah’s common past. Plus, by sarcastically inquiring Sarah about Gaudet’s and Walter’s alikeness — “Does he remind you of someone?” — Manon attempts to reassert her illusory bond with Sarah through their mutual hatred towards Gaudet (139). Ironically, when Sarah actually speaks to voice her personal experiences, reminiscing about her time in the North where she was treated as or at least almost as an equal, Manon scorns and finds the idea absolutely ludicrous. Manon’s narcissism prevents her from considering her black servant as an individual, but instead always a manifestation of her own feelings and perceptions. This demonstrates Manon’s disconnection from reality as much as her inability to see Sarah as anything else beyond her own mirror reflection.

This essay has discussed the way Valerie Martin employs scopophilic elements to illustrate the subjectivity of Manon, a white woman in the antebellum South. Whereas the spyglass represents Manon’s perverse pleasure in watching slaves be abused and humiliated, the mirror symbolizes her narcissism in perceiving Sarah as her double. It is Manon’s racial entitlement that allows her to enact her voyeuristic and scopophilic fantasies, thus the destruction of these objects signifies the collapse of her power structure. This suggests that the gaze conceptualized by Mulvey is not necessarily a male gaze, but that it can exist in any relationship of domination and exploitation. However, its power is not absolute: as shown by the novel, the gaze can be subverted and the tenuous worldview it constructs may collapse.

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