

Michael Simeone on: A Colossal American Copulation

I'd just like to briefly comment on the standing conversation on MAPS regarding Adrian Louis' "A Colossal American Copulation." It seems that at present, most of the critical work treating the poem is largely concerned with Louis' paradoxically resistant and cooperative relationship to dominant culture. Both Marsh and Beatty see the poem as taking dominant culture as its object, a model that is mostly accurate but effaces a crucial element of self-hatred present in Louis' work; the speaker of the poem is just as much a reflexive target of the poem's invective as the U.S. culture that surrounds him. This is not a poem about "flipping off the U.S" (Beatty); rather, it is a poem that treats the speaker's haunting disillusionment with his own life given the frivolity of U.S. culture and the inevitable decay of the physical body.

Firstly, before anything else, I'd like to make a case for the moral indignation present in these lines. Beatty notes that "Louis undercuts the moral force of any item in his long list of 'fuck you's," but this is far from the case. Louis' poem is veritable freight train of "fucks," all irreverently applied, accumulating a kind of vitriolic, hateful, and sanctimonious momentum that simply cannot be offset by the injection of lines such as "fuck a duck" (which, by the way, I have never heard uttered playfully. In fact, "fuck a duck" is far from harmlessly playful; it is the epitomization of frustration and aggression without object. It is anger without a path of release. The line may be absurd, but it is a cruel, contained, and frustrated absurdity). This and similar "playful" variations (fuck you very much, fuck it again Sam, etc.) certainly contain some ludic interpenetration of tradition and discourse, (as does the whole poem), but it is a stretch to say that, given the violence of the poem's speech and the moral valence of many of its targets (vietnam, for instance), the poem's moral force has been undercut.

Indeed, the poem is a kind of angry whirlwind, sparing little (only mother teresa escapes, but not unscathed; she still gets to be the object of a blunt "fuck you," and despite its retraction one line later, the illocutionary act of telling mother teresa fuck you speaks to the poem's near total lack of concern for the sacred, the respected, and the empowered). Through cursing things like his first sexual experience, his first cigarette, and Bob Dylan, the speaker not only implicates elements of his life in the upkeep of a frivolous culture, but he also self-loathingly denies the pleasure that any of these things gave him. He thus not only negates the world around him, but also negates himself as a creature capable of happiness.

Crucial to this disillusionment with existence (NOT just U.S. culture) is a realization of the decay of the human body over time. The recount of his personal history through substance abuse serves as a grim reminder of the deterioration of the speaker's own body, and his preemptive fuck you-ing of the man that will see him dead again speaks to the materiality and transience of human flesh. Most notable to this point, however, is his choice to round out the poem with an attack on the disease that affects his "woman."

Here, the speaker is not lamenting his own choices, attacking the U.S., or even engaging in any kind of disturbing irreverence; he is literally shouting against decay, "Fuck Alzheimer's."

The conclusion of the poem, then, functions less as a nihilistic assertion of the middle finger (Beatty) and more of a frustrated realization of the speaker's position within a frivolous and

unjust culture, an aging body, and the unforgiving attrition of life experiences and the passage of time.

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