

# You Marxist, I Clean Toilet

## Racism, Labor, and the Bathroom attendant

by Tara Atluri

### Abstract

*Slavoj Žižek writes that “It is easy for an academic of a round table to claim that we live in a post-ideological universe but the moment he visits the lavatory after the heated discussion, he is again knee deep in ideology” (Žižek, 2004). Žižek cites Hegel who was “...the first to see in the geographical triad of Germany, France, and England an expression of three different existential attitudes: reflective thoroughness (German), revolutionary hastiness (French), utilitarian pragmatism (English)” (Žižek, 2004). The Žižekian toilet is never just a toilet. Rather it reflects upon how our lives are governed by the ideologies of places in which we live, work, and well, shit. I am interested in other fixtures of the contemporary bathroom. Namely, I am troubled by the restroom attendant, a strange figure in urban Western public spaces. In an article titled “Who Would Be a Bathroom Attendant?” the BBC reveals that the job is often carried out by non status migrant workers (Cook, 2010). I am interested in the relationship between slavery which allotted black bodies ‘care’ roles and the current racialisation of undocumented workers. To paraphrase Sivanandan, the restroom attendant might speak to a time in which citizenship is the new black (Sivanandan, 2001). I further reflect upon what attendants can tell us about racism and academic labour. Drawing upon a case at Duke University where a student referred to a Black professor as “... a cross between a welfare queen and a restroom attendant” (Lawrence, 1990) and a performance art piece in which I played a restroom attendant, I return to Žižek’s assertion that once the debates are done, one can learn a lot in the lavatory.*

*It is easy for an academic of a round table to claim that we live in a post-ideological universe but the moment he visits the lavatory after the heated discussion, he is again knee deep in ideology. — Žižek*

The toilets of major nation states can be used to reflect upon the ideological and political leanings of Western powers. Lacanian Marxist Slavoj Žižek reflects upon the differences between German, French, and American styles of toilets. He cites Hegel who was “...the first to see in the geographical

triad of Germany, France, and England an expression of three different existential attitudes: reflective thoroughness (German), revolutionary hastiness (French), utilitarian pragmatism (English)."<sup>1</sup> For Žižek, an appraisal of different toilets in all three countries reflects upon competing existential attitudes and political priorities of all three nation states. The German toilet is designed so that one can examine excrement for disease before disposing of it, while the French toilet disposes of excrement quickly so that nothing can be seen, and finally the American toilet allows the excrement to float in the toilet so that it can be seen but not inspected, before being flushed away. These rather crude details for Žižek are a perfect way to discuss how seemingly mundane realities are part of a broader ideological structure. He states that,

The point about toilets is that they enable us not only to discern this triad in the most intimate domain but also to identify its underlying mechanism in the three different attitudes toward excremental excess: an ambiguous contemplative fascination, a wish to get rid of it as fast as possible; a pragmatic decision to treat it as ordinary and dispose of it in an appropriate way.<sup>2</sup>

The Žižekian toilet is never just a toilet. Rather, it allows one to examine how our lives, minds, and bodies continue to be governed by the ideologies that inform the nation states in which we live, work, and well, shit. These porcelain thrones conceal all the dirty horrors that are hidden behind the shiny veneer of advanced capitalism. But what of the figure of the bathroom attendant? There is something strangely Victorian about the bathroom attendant, standing in waiting in the toilets of bars and clubs with a strange assortment of candy, toiletries, and sometimes even flowers. Who is this shadowy figure? Do we need to buy chewing gum in the toilet from an exploited immigrant, when the exploited immigrants at the 7/11 are only a stones throw away?

While Žižek theorizes about what the differences between the various toilets of Europe can tell us about the competing political ideogologies of nations, I would argue that the figure of the racialized, migrant bathroom attendant reflects on the similitude of the racialization of labor that cuts across time and space. As Žižek himself points out, the irony of the rhetoric of multicultural diversity and globalization lies in the increasing cultural hegemony brought about by advanced capitalism,

<sup>1</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "Knee Deep," *London Review of Books* Vol. 26 No. 17 (2 September 2004): 12-13.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

through which similar products and lifestyles can be found wherever one travels.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the bathroom attendant might speak to presence of exploited migrant labor across the globe, and to the persistence of colonial ideologies to justify new forms of racist labor exploitation.

The bathroom attendant stands at a strange nexus between servant and watchman. On the one hand, we are given an air of royalty. We, regular North American and European drunks and partygoers, nouveau riche chavs have our own personal coolie, under whose watchful glaring eye we can never again exit the loo without washing our hands. At the same time, the attendant is also a bathroom bully, who in all honesty is just a rent-a-cop with perfume making sure we aren't shooting up or dipping into the nose candy in public view.

The bathroom attendant is there for us. But not in the way of a bartender whose function is largely as an intoxicant. The attendant has a moralizing function. How can you not wash your hands when a nice auntie from Bangladesh is looking at you with suspicion? How can you have that on the d-low gay sex in the toilet when Samuel, an unrecognized physicist from Nigeria is hovering over you? Would he like to join in? Are you kidding? He has a job to do. Thought of pumping yourself full of heroin to rev up the party? Not while Maria, an illegal from Mexico is on watch. The bathroom attendant is a menacing social presence who threatens the privacy of the washroom experience, making you realize that you are never really alone, that your most minute and private bodily gestures are implicated within a system of globalised labor, commerce, consumerism, and social life.

The bathroom attendant makes a graduate student who studies the plight of undocumented workers feel guilty. The bathroom attendant makes a half-naked Desi girl at a sleazy club remember her mom. The bathroom attendant tells stories of seeing the upper middle classes puke their guts out night after night. The bathroom attendant tells us something about how immigration, racism, and citizenship join hands to produce a neo-colonial workforce that is still wiping Masta's ass. After Rosa from the Dominican tells you how hard medical school was back home, toilet paper and cheap perfume will never look the same again.<sup>4</sup>

3 See Slavoj Žižek, "Multiculturalism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism," *New Left Review* 1/225 (September-October 1997).

4 Note, this piece is not an ethnography. These examples are fictionalized. I did speak to bathroom attendants, mainly in London, England in preparation for my performance art piece and in writing this article. I am sensitive to how ethnography can be used as a form of surveillance and policing of populations constructed to be "illegal" and potentially facing deportation, so I have chosen fictional and artistic mediums to discuss the case of "the

## Kitchens and Bathrooms

In this work, I am interested in how what we find in our lavatories could tell us about the ideologies that govern our lives. In particular, I am interested in the shadowy figure of the restroom attendant, a feature of contemporary urban Western life who appears as a strange phantom in places that hold true to myths of privacy and equality.

I use the figure of the bathroom attendant as a performative trope, which through a dramatic staging and theoretical interrogation, might offer insight into the tenacity of racism and perhaps into how the forms it takes shift across time and space, while bearing traces of anxieties towards and efforts to contain “the real.”<sup>5</sup> By performing the figure of the racialized female immigrant bathroom attendant in academic space, I gesture to the ironies of canons of postcolonial feminist scholarship in the context of racist and sexist labor inequality. The bathroom attendant is also a figure through which one can discern how racist ideologies bleed into contemporary practices of xenophobia and citizenship, which racialize female immigrant labor in visceral ways.

I use the performance art piece I staged in November 2009 titled “Kitchens and Bathrooms” in which I played a washroom attendant to reflect upon the ironies of contemporary identity politics in the context of advanced capitalism. The attendant might speak to how the privileges of class and citizenship allow some to market marginality, while others remain in the lavatory.

Just as Žižek reflects upon the lavatory and the toilet in particular, as a site upon which to discern variant political ideologies, what might the restroom attendant tell us about the thinking that informs contemporary attitudes towards labor, ‘race,’ immigration, capital and the body?

I begin by discussing “the bathroom attendant” as a laborer whose work and identity might speak to the conflation of old racisms with new xenophobic practices of citizenship, and to how ideologies of capitalism exploit and produce the markings and meanings made out of racialized, gendered bodies. I then turn to the performance art piece, “Kitchens and Bathrooms” staged in 2009. I use the piece to discuss the ironies that arise when certain bodies attempt to occupy academic space. I develop this discussion regarding racialized female labor in academic space by discussing a case at Duke University

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bathroom attendant.”

5 I offer a more discussion of “the real” and its relationship to “race,” racism and labor throughout the paper.

where a student referred to a Black female professor as a cross between a “bathroom attendant and a welfare queen.” I then offer a general discussion of the labor exploitation of wash-room attendants, who are often undocumented migrants. I conclude by discussing how attention to the exploitation of migrant female labor might trouble discourses of identity politics within academic space and gesture to the need for the academic left to perhaps turn its gaze to seemingly mundane and yet deeply ideological spaces like lavatories, and those who service them.

This paper offers less succinct answers, solutions and conclusions and asks more questions of the reader, of academic scholarship and of the ivory tower. What is the relationship between academic nomenclatures like “woman of color” and the figures of racialized female labor that operate the lower rungs of the University machine? What is the relationship between old ideologies of racism that derive from slavery and newer forms of xeno-racism that racialize migrant laborers? Who is the academic that can learn a lot in Žižek’s lavatory? Who cleans and services this academic toilet? Does the academic who learns a lot ever encounter the one who cleans the Žižekian toilet, and if so what might they learn from such an encounter?

This paper is an attempt to discuss everyday matters of labor exploitation, racism, and sexism. It is also an attempt to think critically about the academic spaces in which we make our arguments, and their washrooms.

### Rent a Cops with Lollipops

The British Broadcasting Association recently published an article titled, “Who Would be a Bathroom Attendant?” which outlines the growing presence of restroom attendants in posh London clubs. The article focuses on the exploitative nature of attendants labor and highlights the irritation that attendants pose to customers. What simmers below this liberal appraisal of the profession is the ideology of late capitalism that colors the figure of the modern restroom attendant.<sup>6</sup> The majority of attendants in London are not British or EU citizens and are often new immigrants from third world or formerly communist countries. As the job largely involves soliciting patrons for tips, it can be categorized as cash-in-hand work, making it a popular profession for undocumented workers.<sup>7</sup> The undocu-

<sup>6</sup> See: Daniel Cook “Who’d be a Toilet Attendant?” BBC News Magazine, 2008. Online Edition. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/magazine/7335315.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/7335315.stm). Accessed: May 1, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

mented, racialized restroom attendant speaks to a time in the United Kingdom in which attitudes towards 'race' and racism have shifted. While Gilroy could easily and rightly note years ago that "There ain't no Black in the Union Jack," he now writes of a multi ethnic Britain where youth culture is informed by smatterings of various diasporic slangs and styles and where mixed race populations abound.<sup>8</sup> However, if we visit the lavatory, things perhaps look a little less harmonious. While a mode of racism based strictly on color might, to a certain degree, have gone out of fashion within liberal Western centers, citizenship perhaps, is the new black.<sup>9</sup> To rephrase Žižek, it is easy for academics at a roundtable to claim that we live in a post-race universe. But the moment she visits the lavatory, she is knee deep in questions of race, labor, and neo-colonialism.

### Is Citizenship the New Black? The Racialization of Undocumented Labor

The bathroom attendant speaks to how ideas of citizenship coalesce with ideologies of 'race.' The racialized immigrant body is constructed, through racist and xenophobic ideologies as being of the body, placing them on the lowly end of dualist Cartesian thinking. The construction of "other" bodies as bodies – not minds – is rooted in discourses of colonialism and slavery.<sup>10</sup> These old ideologies are reinforced in new labor practices which quadron off the bodies of immigrants and undocumented Others to occupations of the body. For example, Wolkowitz and Edwards note that racialization and sexism continue to govern the labor of immigrant women, who are often allotted to roles in the workforce that involve "body work," which entails looking after others through care and service occupations.<sup>11</sup> In the case of the restroom attendant, immigrant bodies are literally placed within the realm of shit.

8 See: Paul Gilroy, "Ali G and the Oscars," Opendemocracy. April 3, 2002. [http://www.opendemocracy.net/faith-Film/article\\_459.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/faith-Film/article_459.jsp). Accessed: February 1, 2010. Paul Gilroy, *Post-colonial Melancholia*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

9 See: SA. ivanandan, "Poverty is the New Black." *Race & Class* 43 (October 2001): 1-5. The phrase "citizenship is the new black" is meant to reflect upon the racialization of undocumented workers, using an ironic play on words to reflect a deeper shifting political reality.

10 See: Radhika Mohanram, *Black Body: Women, Colonialism, and Space*, (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

11 See: Paul Edwards and Carl Wolkowitz, "Sociology of Employment in Britain" in *Worlds of Work*, eds. Daniel B. Cornfield and Randy Hodson (New York: Llewellyn/Plenum, 2002).

Yet while the construction of the immigrant as of the body rather than mind justifies labor exploitation, this association with corporeality threatens to overtake the ruse of rational repressed bourgeois society. The assumed sexual licentiousness of the one who is associated with the body must be contained. However marking immigrant bodies as just that, bodies, also serves the states interests in securing a sector of low-paid laborers. For Žižek, the lavatory is a place, purely, of shit. However, the restroom attendant tells us something about the uses of public bathrooms as places not purely of utility, but spaces that are endemic to contemporary Western morality.

The Western nightclub restroom is not just full of literal shit, but full of all sorts of other shit too. Note that restroom attendants while appearing as figures of courtesy and servitude have largely been placed in Western restrooms to curtail drug use, fights, and sex that often takes place in London's public restrooms.<sup>12</sup> They are, in many regards, rent-a-cops with lolipops. Beyond a usual appraisal of the exploitation of immigrant labor are the interesting questions regarding morality, 'race,' and citizenship that are contained in the presence of the restroom attendant.<sup>13</sup>

### The Morality Play of the Lavatory

The bathroom attendant serves as a literal cleansing agent, offering us soaps, perfumes and a watchful eye that will prevent one from shooting up, having illicit bathroom sex, or beating someone to a pulp in the lavatory. Yet paradoxically, while the immigrant laborer acts as the hands, eyes, and ears of our failing moral conscience, they also stand out of the bounds of public morality, as their labor is exploited, refusing them the dignity afforded to white Western domestic citizens by virtue of the, frankly, shitty jobs they are expected to do and their even shittier treatment. The bodies of the oppressed are constructed as just that, bodies.

12 See: Daniel Cook, "Who'd be a Toilet Attendant?" *BBC News Magazine*, April 9, 2008. Online Edition. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/magazine/7335315.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/7335315.stm). Accessed: May 1, 2010.

13 For detailed accounts of how undocumented migrants, immigrants, and specifically female migrant labor are exploited in terms of low wages, arduous work conditions, rape, physical, psychological trauma, and biopolitical strategies of surveillance. See: J.H. Momsen, *Gender, migration, and domestic service*, (London: Routledge, 1999). Floya Anthias, Nira Yuval-Davis, and Harriet Cain, *Racialized Boundaries: Race, Nation, Gender, Color and Class and the Anti-Racist Struggle* (London: Routledge, 1993). Eleonore Kofman, *Gender and International Migration in Europe: Employment, Welfare, and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000). Mary Power and William Seltzer, "Occupational Status and Mobility among Undocumented Immigrants by Gender," *International Migration Review* 32 no. 1 (Spring 1998): 1-55.



The classic Cartesian divide of mind/body was and continues to be used to construct those in power as existing above and outside their bodies, as ruled by rationality rather than base physical desire. In "Love Thy Neighbor? No, Thanks!" Žižek discusses how racism and sexism are tied to the construction of the ugly object. He states that,

The ugly object is an object in the wrong place. This does not mean simply that the ugly object is no longer ugly the moment we move it to its proper place. Rather, an ugly object is "in itself" out of place, on account of the distorted balance between its 'representation' (the symbolic features we perceive) and 'existence.' The ugly and out-of-place is the excess of existence over representation. Ugliness is thus a topological category, designating an object that is in a way 'larger than itself,' whose existence is larger than its representation.<sup>14</sup>

What Žižek gestures to is how Cartesian dualism conceives of objects that are seen to be bodily and unruly, as out of place. The construction of certain bodies as bodies, is deeply political, and tied to histories of capital and colonialism. One only need to recount histories of slavery, in which black bodies were seen to be just this, bodies, possessing no intellect, emotion, and rationality and therefore justifiably exploited as material assets.<sup>15</sup> Žižek draws similar conclusions, arguing that ugliness appears in objects that are constructed as leaky, unable to contain fleshy insides behind a veneer of composed representation. He states that,

Ideology's ultimate problem is how to 'contain' the threatening inside from 'spilling out' and overwhelming us. Are women's periods not an exemplary case

<sup>14</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Verso, 2008): 167. There is also an expansive body of feminist literature regarding the abject body. Žižek's work in particular is tied to Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject body. Given the constraints of space and time, I have not offered a review of this work, however further references include: Julia Kristeva, "Approaching Abjection," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (London: Routledge, 2003). Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994). Radhika Mohanram, *Black Body: Women, Colonialism, Space* (St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1999). Catherine Kevin, ed., *Feminism and the Body: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Janet Price and Margit Shilrick, eds., *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>15</sup> See: Ronald L. Jackson, *Scripting the Black Masculine Body* (State University of New York Press: Albany, 2006).



of such an ugly inside spilling out? Is the presence of African Americans not felt as threatening precisely insofar as it is experienced as too massive, too close? Suffice it to recall the grotesque racist caricature of black faces with eyes bulging out and too large a mouth, as if the outside surface is barely able to contain the inside that threatens to break through.<sup>16</sup>

What is interesting, and deeply insightful is Žižek's discussion of racialized, gendered bodies as ugly objects out of place and his discussion concerning anxieties over the disposal of shit. He states that,

...the racist fantasmatic duality of blacks and whites coincides in their encounter with the remainder. Is the concern with how to dispose of shit (which, according to Lacan, is one of the crucial features differentiating man from animals) also not a case of how to get rid of the inside that ceaselessly emerges?<sup>17</sup>

The parallel Žižek draws between shit and race is useful in discussing the figure of the bathroom attendant. The restroom attendant is the remover of the inside, while at the same time, the racialized female worker is an example of the ceaseless inside that threatens the ruse of white bourgeois representation. Perhaps, the restroom attendant is invited to police and regulate the toilet, to literally be with and amongst shit due to the connection between the racialized body and the fear of the emergent corporeality that Western cultures guard against.

Both the body of the racialized immigrant and excrement act as a reminder of the unrelenting inside, the bodily underside of white Western rationality that must be contained to maintain the ruse of order and hygiene. However, rather than complete abjection, the figure of the restroom attendant acts as an example of how this monstrous inside is on the one hand prohibited and yet still included within the nation. As Žižek states, "In order to survive, we need a minimum of the real—in a contained, gentrified condition."<sup>18</sup> The shit is disposed of in the same way that the racialized immigrant body is, through the ruse of order, bureaucracy and bourgeois pleasantries. The containing, gentrifying condition of the real is managed through the hygiene, order, and ruse of Western pleasantries.

<sup>16</sup> Žižek, *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

In the case of shit, we have glorious, bleached-out porcelain thrones, soaps, and ornate bathroom fixtures. In the case of the attendant, we have the ruse of polite labor. The dictates of advanced capitalism make the restroom attendant more or less a latrine cleaner with tips.

**"You Go to India to Get Baby,  
I Clean Toilet": The Shadowy Figure  
of the Bathroom Attendant**

In 2009 I was asked to participate in an art show organized by a university professor. It took place at a makeshift art gallery in Toronto and displayed the artwork of many emerging local artists. As the curator and host was a tenured professor at the University for which I acted as a contract faculty member, the staging of the event, my participation in it, and the composition of the audience who attended were largely structured by the hierarchies of class and institutional politics that also structure implicit and explicit hierarchies of labor within the ivory tower. The event was littered with academics, graduate students, and other middle class types with progressive politics. I decided to stage a performance art piece that was, on the one hand, meant to be comical, while also somewhat disruptive and annoying. As a friend I cajoled into video taping and photographing the show commented, "You'll do anything to make academics squirm."

The piece was titled "Kitchens and Bathrooms" and involved sitting outside of the rest room, posing as a bathroom attendant that one might find at a posh bar or restaurant. Like many of the bathroom attendants I have personally encountered in major Western cities, I looked and sounded the part. Wearing a sari and feigning a universal "Indian accent," I sat outside the bathroom with a small table of amenities that carried wares which attendants often carry: chewing gum, mints, condoms, toilet paper, and of course the looming tip jar, encouraging patrons to tip the often female, immigrant laborer well.

The character I played was a bathroom attendant with a discernible edge. She broke the antiquated stereotypes of Orientalist femininity that often color perceptions of South Asian women, and particularly new immigrant women. When cheap patrons refused to tip, as many of them did, tenured or not, I demanded a tip. I also handed each patron a card upon which I wrote condemning, mocking messages such as, "You Marxist, I clean toilet." I was expecting groans and sneers. However, to my shock, surprise and later upon reflection, disappointment, the wearing of a sari, an Indian accent, and the positioning of my body as that of a servile laborer caused

many to believe that I was in fact a bathroom attendant. While I did make over 10 dollars in tip, making the venture more lucrative and cost effective than any academic event I've been asked to participate in before, it was also a sad statement on the racialized, gendered, and class-based imaginings of many.

In "Artistic Activism and Antagonistic Spaces" Chantal Mouffe discusses the radical political potential of art, to act as a force that disrupts the tenants of liberal ideology upon which she argues the "...incapacity to think politically..." rests. Mouffe argues that,

The dominant tendency in liberal thought is characterized by a rationalist and individualist approach which is unable to grasp adequately the pluralistic nature of the social world, with the conflicts that pluralism entails; conflicts for which no rational solution could ever exist, hence the dimension of antagonism that characterizes all human societies.<sup>19</sup>

Mouffe argues that a refusal to deal with antagonism produces a political apathy disguised as neutrality. In order to conceive of the world politically one must deal with the necessary antagonism that exists between social actors who cannot reach consensus and harmony through individual acts or behaviors, as they are systemically and politically at odds due to power differentials produced by a neo-liberal order. Mouffe states that thinking politically means,

...coming to terms with the lack of a final ground and the undecidability which pervades every order. It requires in other words recognizing the hegemonic nature of every kind of social order and the fact that every society is the product of a series of practices attempting at establishing order in a context of contingency.<sup>20</sup>

Mouffe argues against the Habermasian notion of the public sphere as a space of harmony and consensus building, and instead sees public spaces as theatres in which the necessary oppositions that exist between people are staged. As she rightly argues, "...public spaces are always plural and the ag-

<sup>19</sup> Chantal Mouffe, "Artistic Activism and Antagonistic Spaces," *Art and Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts, and Methods* 1 no. 2 (Summer 2007):1. Online edition. <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/mouffe.html>. Accessed: May 1, 2010.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 2.

onistic confrontation takes place in a multiplicity of diverse surfaces."<sup>21</sup> The potential of art lies in the possibility that, rather than shying away from antagonism, it could bring conflict to the surface, shedding light on the ironies and aggression that are repressed within a liberal order. By playing the bathroom attendant, I attempted to disrupt the liberal bourgeois pleasures that govern academic space.

These spaces are often filled with those who consider themselves to be "left leaning," but are still governed by an ideology of liberalism that conceals all of the dirty stories of labor exploitation, sexism, and racism that structure art and academic worlds. Mouffe states that, "...critical art is art that forments dissensus, that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate. It is constituted by a manifold of artistic practices aiming at giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony."<sup>22</sup>

In the case of the Bathroom attendant, I would argue that the silencing of the migrant female laborer is one of the most glaring obscenities upon which major Western liberal capitalist societies rely. A clear example is found in Stephen Frears film, *Dirty Pretty Things*, which I analyze in detail near the end of this article. In Frear's film, the female character Sanay, who does the gendered racialized labor of cleaning and garment assembly, is both literally and symbolically silenced. Jenny Wills argues that the film constructs her as a docile, silenced, Orientalized woman who is pushed to a state of speechlessness that is characteristic of how refugees and migrants are constructed in the dominant imaginary. She states that,

The connection of political identity and discourse to the territorial state means that those without citizenship or bereft of it are speechless(or taken to be speechless), requiring an agency or expert to speak for them. The 'speechlessness' of refugees reinforces the state-centric political imagination.<sup>23</sup>

Speechlessness is a site of oppression upon which much left-leaning academic and artistic production rests, with left-leaning Western intellectuals coming to represent the body of the silenced, racialized, exploited subject. My ability to perform this piece and embody this character also rested on this same silence. This points to the limitations of using one's privilege

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>23</sup> Jenny Wills, "It's Wide Shut: Examining the Depiction of Female Refugees Eyes and Hands in Stephen Frear's *Dirty Pretty Things*." *Refuge: Canada's Periodical on Refugees* 24 no.2 (2007). Online edition. <http://pi.library.yorku.ca/ojs/index.php/refuge/article/view/21389>. Accessed: May 1, 2010.

to perform an abjection that one can enter and exit easily. An actual undocumented migrant female laborer could not yell at or harass academics, artists, and activists without facing imminent repercussions. However, the piece did carry value as it attempted to reveal the persistence of racism, sexism, xenophobia, and classism that govern spaces that often construct themselves as “progressive.” The piece was necessarily antagonistic in that it refused to construct the female migrant laborer as a figure of melancholic pity as so often happens in mainstream texts, which depict immigrants and refugees.<sup>24</sup>

While Mouffe argues that political art gives voice to the voiceless and Wills argues that the female migrant is often inaudible, I would argue that there is a huge production of materials that attempt to represent the third world and racialized female immigrant experience. As Foucault so crucially argued, repression often gives way to rather than stops discourse production.<sup>25</sup> The problem is that contemporary discursive constructions of the immigrant female experience often recirculate Orientalist myths, tenants of white supremacy, and are both implicitly and explicitly complicit in neo liberal ideologies and current imperialist civilizing missions.

The performance piece attempted to subvert what Ansari refers to as the “native informant” position that is often taken by second generation people of color in their efforts to represent the struggles of those in the global south, and I would also add, new immigrants who come from the global south.<sup>26</sup> Such a position makes the diasporic subject a native informant who can gain insider status to tell the stories of those in and from the global south through the lense of neo liberal ideologies that construct problems third world people and, specifically, women as ones of culture and patriarchy, offering dominant Western audiences a fetishistic gaze that leaves them feeling unimplicated, redeemed and culturally superior.

By playing a bathroom attendant with an edge who mocked patrons with slogans such as “You go to India to get baby, I clean toilet” my performance did not offer up a narrative of third world immigrant female oppression that recirculates imperialist ideas of Asian women as being brutalized by men and culture, but implicated the audience in structures of racism and neoliberalism that inform immigrant women’s labor exploitation. The performance produced deep discomfort in

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> See: Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (Random House: London, 1978).

<sup>26</sup> See: Usamah Ansari, “Should I Go and Pull Her Burqa Off?: Feminist Compulsions, Insider Consent, and a Return to Kandahar”, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 25 no. 1 (2008): 48 – 67.

many, thereby acting as an attempt to create political art as Mouffe conceives of it, as a disruption of the silences of liberalism that does not offer a narrative of answers but perhaps shows that there is no expedient happy ending to many stories.

Finally, the piece allowed me an outlet of visceral reckoning in which I was able to comment on the racism of supposedly progressive academic and artistic spaces. Consider that the companion of someone who was an external examiner on my PhD defense committee believed that I was the bathroom attendant, and consider the strange, uncomfortable, guilt-ridden, anxious reactions when I changed back into my normal clothes and began to tell many of the academics and artists who mistook me for an actual attendant that I actually completed my PhD at their University in 2008 and my dissertation focused on humor, 'race,' and racism.

### **That's Dr. Bathroom Attendant to You: 'Race,' Gender, and Academic Labor**

In her piece, "Black Skin/White Boards," Gargi Bhattacharya reflects on the precarious life of being a woman of color within the academia. Writing about her experiences as "the race lady," who lectures within a humanities program in British universities about 'race,' she discusses the paradoxes, ironies, and difficulties of being an anti-racist educator within the ivory tower. Bhattacharya reworks Fanon's "Black Skin, White Masks" to discuss a context in which, rather than trying to escape the prison of one's dark skin, the anti-racist educator is made to wear their skin for a living, with a sanitized salable version of racial alterity being used to lend credibility to their scholarship. She states that "...the black teacher as black teacher becomes the exemplary educational text, the visible symptom which illuminates the whole hidden structure of 'race.'"<sup>27</sup> Bhattacharya points to the essential paradox of being a "professional minority" by drawing on the work of Patricia Williams. Williams argues that the personal, visceral and everyday experiences of racism and sexism put her academic authority and credibility in constant question, while ironically, it is because of these same every day experiences of oppression that her position as a Black feminist and anti-racist scholar are lent an air of authenticity.<sup>28</sup> Bhattacharya states that "...some bodies (black, female) have more trouble wearing the authority of teacher—that it is difficult to think of the

27 Gargi Bhattacharya, "Black Skin/White Boards: Learning to be the 'race' lady in British higher education," in *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader*, eds. Les Black and John Solomos (London: Routledge, 2000): 481.

28 Ibid, 482-484.

teacher as at once Ms. Marginal Minority and Dr. Academic/Institution Power.”<sup>29</sup>

The performance piece attempted to visualize the impossibility of occupying these two positions and the easy ways in which one can easily slip from being “Professional oppressed brown woman” to “regular oppressed brown woman” when taken out of the context of institutional authority. We can again return to Žižek, who argues that, “In order to survive, we need a minimum of the real—in a contained, gentrified condition”<sup>30</sup> What if we viewed the anti-racist classroom as a site of this containment? Žižek argues that late capitalist multiculturalism markets “the Other” in palatable ways that strip her of her kernel of jouissance and forestall the terrifying threat of the “real” other.

A change in dress and accent and you quickly go from being another academic at the roundtable conference to a bathroom attendant. Spivak has discussed what she terms the “grounding mistake” upon which much political and humanities-based education rests. She states that “Texts open when you talk to groups of others, which often turn out to be classes, public audiences. Yet these openings are not beginnings, for the stagings of each such talking is secured by politics.”<sup>31</sup> I would argue that within anti racist education, terms like “Woman of color” and “Academic of color” work as salable commodities by disavowing practices that govern the everyday workings of the University.

Outside of the classroom, where one possesses an illusory form of power, the experience of being female with dark skin can be uncomfortable, comically tragic, and downright violent. The irony also lies in how those who attain some form of class and educational privilege feel the deadening weight of racism which persists despite their claims to middle class achievement and white Western scripts of rationality. As Bhattacharya states, “It’s the people who try to lose the jungle who feel most marked by the jungle.”<sup>32</sup> In 1990 at Duke University, controversy erupted regarding a racist comment made towards a black female professor whom students referred to as “...a cross between a bathroom attendant and a welfare queen.”<sup>33</sup> The case illustrates, in the most vile way, how the

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 482.

<sup>30</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “Against Human Rights,” *libcom.org* <http://libcom.org/library/against-human-rights-Žižek>. Accessed: February 10, 2011.

<sup>31</sup> Spivak, quoted in Bhattacharya, “Black Skin/White Boards,” 484.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 480.

<sup>33</sup> See: Charles R. Lawrence III, “If he hollers let him go: regulating racist speech on campus” *Duke Law Journal* 1990 no. 3 *Frontiers of Legal Thought*



Black female body who holds a position of institutional authority can so easily slip within a culture obsessed with visibility, into a field of vision that apprehends the body through centuries of patriarchal, imperial history.

Much like Fanon's classic moment of racist interpellation in which he is hailed in metropolitan France by a child on a street who screams out, "Look! A Negro!" the Black female professor can still be hailed into being as a disposable, deviant body. As Žižek argues, the leaky body of the Other threatens to spill out. The gentrified figure of the anti-racist Other is always threatened by its obscene underbelly, the shadow of the Real that haunts the staged, legislated spectacles which surface in manic moments of racism. Žižek states that,

The kernel of the real is the retroactive product, the fallout, of the very process of symbolization. Real is the unfathomable remainder of the ethnic substance whose predicates are different cultural features that constitute our identity. In this precise sense, race relates to culture as the real does to the symbolic. "Real" is the unfathomable X that is at stake in our cultural struggles; it is what makes us feel that someone "steals" our culture from us when he knows too much about it...<sup>34</sup>

This elusive "Real" is felt in the visceral markings of racialized bodies and specifically racialized female bodies who provoke strong, often violent reactions despite institutional anti racism. This presence of the Real speaks to the racialization of labor in the figure of the bathroom attendant who is contained to bodily labor in ways that speak to the menacing presence of their bodies, as bodies, within Western metropolises.

Consider that in 2003 Cheryl Tweedy of the pop group Girls Aloud was found guilty of assaulting a bathroom attendant, a female African immigrant whom she called a "fucking black bitch." The containment of the black female body in certain spheres of labor, much like the containment of bodily repressions through bourgeois bathrooms is never complete, as there are always these encounters with the Real terror of racism.

The liberal answer to such problems, answers we are all forced to employ, is to turn to the law. To conceive of this student as an individual racist and penalize him for his utterance.

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II. The New First Amendment (June 1990): 431-483.

<sup>34</sup> Žižek, *On Violence*, 169.

However, as Mouffe argues, liberal answers avoid questioning deeper political structures which make such utterances conceivable and possible within contemporary academic space. Liberal frameworks refuse to examine the antagonism of power relations that are at the heart of public spheres and public institutions, of which the University is a part. While the student's comment is deplorable, it is also a moment in which the phacade of race-blind, polite, bourgeois academic pleasantries is lifted and we get a glimpse into enduring fictions of slavery coupled with neo liberal racist ideologies that determine how racialized female bodies are made sense of. Žižek argues that,

At the very moment when, according to the official ideology, we are finally leaving behind the immature political passions and realizing a postideological mature pragmatic universe of rational administration and negotiated consensus, free of utopian impulses, in which the dispassionate administration of social affairs goes hand in hand with aestheticized hedonism (the pluralism of 'ways of life')—at this precise moment, the foreclosed political celebrates a triumphant comeback in its most archaic form of pure, undistilled racist hatred of the other, which renders utterly impotent the rational tolerant attitude.<sup>35</sup>

What we see in these outbursts is the return of the repressed. The "post race" post-political politics of multiculturalism cannot contain the racism of labor exploitation and the disavowed psychic anxieties that overflow the administrative management of "race." We can draw further insights from the idea of the Žižekian chocolate laxative. Discussing a laxative sold in America that is packaged as a chocolate, branded with the slogan "Do you have constipation? Eat more chocolate!" Žižek draws a parallel between an ideological and political landscape in which what caused a problem is also constructed as leading to its solution. He states that "The same structure—the thing itself is the remedy against the threat it poses—is widely visible in today's ideological landscape."<sup>36</sup> He discusses this structure as defining an ethos of "tolerance" than governs contemporary multicultural attitudes regarding "race."

Žižek states that, "My duty to be tolerant towards the Other effectively means that I should not get too close to him, intrude on his space....In short, the Other is just fine, but only insofar as his presence is not intrusive, insofar as this Other is

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

not really other..."<sup>37</sup> In the cases of racist outbursts in speech, in Frears' film, and in the figure of the bathroom attendant, we see desperate efforts to keep "the Other" as an Other at bay. While the multicultural Other is condoned in a quaint folklorist form, the bodily Other is threatening and is consistently regulated. What a discourse of multicultural tolerance does is to mask the visceral nature of racism and perhaps to even justify the quarantining of bodily Otherness to the borders of nation states and labor forces.

What the performance art piece attempted to do was not to answer such associations of dark-skinned female bodies and deviance with individualistic penalties or righteous claims to middle class respectability. Rather, in playing the racialized female body as a figure of disposable labor among academics that fetishize the bodies of a few brown women while often turning a blind eye to the blatant exploitation of the rest, I attempted to play with uncomfortable realities of racism, gender, and labor that will not be solved by law suits or tenure.

### **Mammies without Visas: 'Race,' Gender, and the Bathroom Attendant**

The racialization of the labor of bathroom attendants might also hearken back to old discourses of slavery. We can recall "the Mammy," a recurrent figure in North American slavery, a Black female "house slave" whose job was on the one hand, to act as a servant for her white masters while also acting as a maternal presence, a surrogate mother for the children of her white masters, an enslaved figure of care. The slave's body was on the one hand, obscenely exploited at every turn, a site of the most profoundly violent manifestations of capitalist thinking. However, the slave's body also became a site of moral regulation, as the desexualized Mammy was made to act as a selfless martyr-like mother. The Mammy was ultimately a moral figure, whose labor and body were made to serve the slave owning family in ways that curtailed any possibility of her own desire.<sup>38</sup> In post colonial contexts, we could perhaps argue that the bodies of immigrant and specifically undocumented immigrant labor are also invited and imagined to occupy these spaces of morality, while also being heinously and immorally exploited.

What "the Mammy" as a site of comparison to the modern restroom attendant also offers is a way to reflect upon how ideologies of 'race,' labor and immigration are tied to discourses

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>38</sup> Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Routledge, 1997).

of sex, sexuality, and the family. While the racialization of “the Mammy” as a black slave is tied to a wider discourse of anti-black racism, the similar association increasingly made between migrant bodies and devalued forms of embodied labor may attest to how xenophobic discourse racialize new immigrant bodies, despite color and nationality. While a “Mammy” from Uzbekistan might not resemble Aunt Jemima, the construction of the female immigrant as being fit to do work that is of the body rather than the mind could reflect the flexible and positional superiority<sup>39</sup> of racist discourse which can subsume different bodies under a rhetoric that naturalizes exploitation.

The threat of the immigrant body is not simply one of labor, as is often heard in the familiar racist refrain of “immigrants stealing our jobs.” Another real insidious, menacing and maddening threat of the immigrant is one of sex and sexuality. Like the slave body, the threat of the black body lies not just in its aggressiveness and the possibility of revolt, but in the menacing sexual anxieties it produces.<sup>40</sup> Black bodies are on the one hand deeply, overly, pathologically sexualized within white supremacist culture. The fetishisation of black sexuality is a conduit for repressed white bourgeois desire.

The paradox of sexualizing “the Other” lies in the threat that overly sexualized bodies pose to the nation state. While the black body is fetishized, the assumed unruly sexuality of the Other has to be guarded against as evinced in decades of miscegenation law. Similarly, if we accept that citizenship is the new black, questions of sex, sexuality, and morality cannot be divorced from xenophobic discourses and labor practices that regulate the bodies of new immigrants within Western centers.

The desexualization of the Mammy removes her as a sexual threat to the white bourgeois mistress of the household, while masking the common occurrence of rape and sexual assault by slave women at the hands of their masters. The body of the female house slave is available for the sexual gratification and exploitation of her masters while she is simultaneously desexualised in ways that curtail her possible sexual agency and sexual exploitation.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, non status migrant bodies are produced through discourses of sexual morality that serve to manage their threat to the nation state and consolidate national scripts of bourgeois heteronormative familial normalcy.

39 See: Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Routledge: London, 1979).

40 See Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press: 1997).

41 See bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. (Boston: South End Press, 1992).

### Pretty but not that Dirty: Regulating the Sex of Immigrant Bodies

Stephen Frears' film *Dirty Pretty Things* offers one of the only mainstream artistic exploration of the lives of undocumented workers in London. However, Frears' film is ultimately another morality play, where the illegalities of undocumented workers are made acceptable to audiences by juxtaposing their crimes with their cultural and sexual morality. Audiences are not made to fear the illegal, who exists within an informal economy that threatens to unsettle the dominant capitalist order. Instead, the sadness, and the cultural and sexual conservatism of characters offsets any threat posed to the nation state. They pimp the system because of sad personal circumstances brought about by their horrid third world origins, not because the system deserves to be pimped.

Frears' film also offers a painfully stark example of how undocumented migrants are associated with the body in ways that denigrate their humanity. As the film progresses, we learn that the manager of the hotel where the migrant workers are employed is selling the organs of non-status migrants in exchange for forged passports which would help them to either stay and work in England or to leave without being arrested for immigration fraud. Frears' film while deeply problematic in its treatment of migrant bodies, does offer an inroads into thinking through how the figure of the non-status migrant is both deeply useful to the workings of the neo-liberal nation state, while also invisible to it.

*Dirty Pretty Things* largely centers around the lives of two characters, an African man and a Turkish woman, Okwe and Senay, undocumented workers who are part of the underbelly of London's labor force. Both characters are depicted as being exploited by the labor industry, as they do the slave like jobs that undocumented migrants often must take up in order to survive. While Frears' film offers a depiction of the lives of undocumented workers, stories which are often silenced within mainstream Western cinema, the film ends up valorizing the nation state by relying on narratives that celebrate myths of romantic heteronormative familial love upon which national narratives rest. Valorizing propertied bourgeois familial normalcy reinforces scripts that construct migrants as bastard children and whores to the nation state, figures who support the mothers and fathers of a country, but whose labor remains unrecognized and desires are never actualized.

The imagined threat of migrants as ones that might swarm the nation is managed by rendering them morally docile in ways that allow audiences to feel pity without unsettling the un-

derlying ideologies upon which questions of citizenship rest. Jenny Willis discusses how Frears' film visualizes the subordination of the female lead character Senay, predominantly through how her eyes and hands are depicted. Willis argues that the depiction of Senay's large, dark, haunting eyes represents the melancholia of the refugee, tapping into a larger discursive production of the exile as one who experiences a perpetual state of estrangement and loss. She specifically draws on Freud's theory of melancholia to argue that the refugee is one who is depicted as being in a constant state of grieving. She states that "...numerous narcissistic objects contributing to the migrant's ego that are lost(home, family, nationality, culture, history) result in an inability to accurately recognize the specific amalgamation of objects of loss—thereby disabling proper mourning and resulting in perpetual melancholia."<sup>42</sup>

What is of interest is how uses of "family, nation, culture, history" construct migrants as being brought to grief by exile. What this assumes is that the one who leaves necessarily experiences loss due to the universal valorization of the prized objects of heteronormative family, and the supposedly blissful, sacred and uncomplicated love of "nation" and "culture." Constructing the migrant as at a loss without "family, culture, and nation" assumes that these things are always pleasurable, remembered with fondness, and experienced by everyone in the same way. Furthermore, constructing the migrant and, specifically, the female refugee as pushed to melancholia without family, 'culture' and nation fails to address the patriarchal tenants of the sexist and heterosexist foundations of dominant "cultures" and nationalisms.<sup>43</sup> Finally, the construction of an inevitable migrant melancholia caused by a loss of family, not in the toll of labor reinforces the normalcy and superiority of privileged bodies within the nation state.

The narrative of the depressed migrant who is at a loss due to abjection from the world of straight, propertied, monogamous families privileges dominant actors who "sing the nation state"<sup>44</sup> and its official anthems of reproductive bliss, and assimilationist hegemony. In her work *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed discusses the 'crises of happiness' she sees as erupting within Western centers whose middle class citizens increasingly turn to discourses of self help and therapy, while reporting higher levels of depression and melancholia. She states that,

<sup>42</sup> See: Willis, "I's Wide Shut," 117.

<sup>43</sup> See: Emberley, *Defamiliarizing the Aboriginal*.

<sup>44</sup> See: Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation State?* (London: Seagull Books, 2007).

What organises the 'crisis of happiness' is the belief that happiness should be an effect of following social ideals, almost as if happiness is the reward for a certain loyalty. Unsurprisingly, then, when we consider how the new science of happiness might relate to recent debates about the future of multiculturalism we find the use of a nostalgic narrative: happiness is identified with ways of life that have been eroded by the mobility of populations within and between nation states.<sup>45</sup>

This 'crises in happiness' is often imagined within nationalist discourse and popular media as being solved by a return to a 'simpler life,' which involves a return to a mythic ideal of family. She notes that the new 'science of happiness,'

....involves not just reproduction of the species, but also social reproduction: through marriage, core values are transmitted, as values that provide the foundations for a good life as well as the biological materials for new life. The new science of happiness might uncouple happiness from the accumulation of wealth, but it still locates happiness in certain places, especially marriage, widely regarded as the primary 'happiness indicator.'<sup>46</sup>

The refugee body within Frears' films is made into a heteronormative subject whose grief leaves the exploitative nature of the labor system unimplicated, by constructing the real source of pain to be a loss of the assumed stability and joy that come from fitting into an idealized national and cultural script. Wills further argues that Frears' film shoots the character of Senay through an Orientalist lense that emphasizes her silent oppression in England. As she states,

Senay's silent body quickly becomes Orientalized by cinematic observers of dominant culture. Embodying many of the qualities characteristic of the Oriental(mystery, exoticism, passivity, and silence), her character risks perpetuating the migrant stereotype in film and media.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>45</sup> See Ahmed, "Multiculturalism and the Promise of Happiness."

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.



The melancholic migrant is pathologized as a depressive who is stripped of family and concomitant national belonging. This narrative fails to examine the melancholia of dominant cultures and heteronormative structures.<sup>48</sup> The phantasmatic ideals of fidelity, honour, and hard work are projected onto the bodies of undocumented migrants who represent an idealized social and sexual morality that the privileged citizens of Western liberal democracies do not possess. The British bosses and patrons Senay and Okwe encounter are duplicitous, unfaithful, and bear no trace of the values of fairness and hard work that Western liberal democracies pride themselves on. The migrant bodies in Frears' film represent on the one hand figures of pity that confirm the normative happiness of idealized citizenship in its propertied, heteronormative, familial form. On the other hand they also act as sites of desire, where the supposed lost values of faithful monogamy and arduous hard working spirit are projected onto the pious, sexless migrant body.

The figures of exile in Frears' film embody sites upon which a conservative sexual and familial morality can be celebrated and confirmed, while paradoxically they are refused the ability to reproduce the nation state. In Frears' film, the sexual threat of the immigrant body as one who might secure the rights of citizenship through sex, visa marriages and becoming impregnated by domestic passport holders is held at bay by constructing the undocumented workers in the film as moral and governed by religious and cultural ethics that make their sexual transgression an impossibility. While Senay and Okwe are shown to have romantic feelings for each other, the film never allows them to actualize their desires as they are both driven by religious and cultural moralities that prevent them from being together. Okwe has a wife in Africa and remains faithful to her despite the fact that he may never see her again. Senay remains loyal to a sexually conservative ethos despite the fact that her body is constantly violated by her sweatshop boss. The desires of migrant bodies are muted and made only to serve the dominant citizenry, both literally, in terms of their easy sexual exploitation and metaphorically, as audiences can fetishize their piety and purity, projecting lost imagined ideals of chastity onto foreign bodies.

Deeper challenges that the migrant body poses to the state and social order are held at bay through a tired recirculation of familial morality. The real melancholia of major Western nation states that repress those who stand outside the national family script, and dissident bodies who stand outside the script of sanctioned heterosexual romance is held at bay by both pitying the migrant and valorizing their fidelity to tenants

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48 Ibid, 121-160.

of family and hard work that they are perpetually excluded from (See Ahmed, 2007).

Senay and Okwe are modern day Mammies and Uncle Toms made to embody and uphold the very values of a system that brutalizes them and bars their full and equitable participation. The threat of the immigrant is managed by neutering both characters. They exist only to be exploited by Western economies, with their desires held at bay, only being actualized outside of the nation state. Similarly, we can think of how the slave wage labor of the racialized immigrant bathroom attendant works to contain this figure's desire. The bathroom attendant stands at a distance from the decadent sexualized world of the nightclub, existing only to police patrons from their hedonistic behavior, unable to actualize any of their own bodily desires but made to regulate those of affluent customers. Again, there is a heap of racial and sexual ideology in the toilet. While Western countries often boast themselves to be bastions of sexual freedom and loose morals, and the exploitation of immigrants is often justified based on discourses that imagine other nations to purport misogyny and homophobia, immigrant bodies within the supposedly liberal West are often subject to insidious forms of regulation. The racialized immigrant is castrated through the literal containment of bodies in labor positions that prevent the actualization of desire, and through legal regulations that subject them to invasive forms of sexual and moral regulation. Consider that those who apply for citizenship based on any sort of claim to marriage or family are subject to intrusive inquisitions regarding their sexuality, and personal relationships.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, Western nation states often revel in constructing the immigrant body as a "family man" in ways, as evinced in Frears' film, that manage their threat to the nation state by constructing them as champions of European Judeo Christian morality. By playing a bathroom attendant with a discernible edge who attempted to make vocal and visible the operations of oppression that trouble narratives of Western liberal democracy, I tried to unsettle not only the assumed silence and gratitude of the migrant, but the ruses of bourgeois pleasantries that enable ongoing crimes of capitalism to continue in the most violently genteel ways.

### **You Marxist, I Clean Toilet**

In London, England, as a post-doctoral researcher at the London School of Economics, I went to all the parties, attended all the conferences and made all the right heady, complicated arguments. But there was this moment of being brought into my skin. In the bathroom at a fancy academic party, she sat:

<sup>49</sup> See Berlant, *The Queen of America*.

a bathroom attendant in a sari with an Indian accent. I would have relied on post structuralism to ignore her as race and gender are of course, constructs. The problem was that she bore an uncanny resemblance to my mother. The problem was that our eyes met and I couldn't even smile in order to feign some illusion of sisterhood and solidarity. She looked me up and down: my stupid conference badge, my hipster shoes and protest badges. I left the bathroom without looking at what she had to sell. I did not leave a tip. Throughout the rest of the conference her face haunted me. I recalled her sitting there in the bathroom as I played out my legislated, sanitized role.

I recalled her as I took the bus back to East London and watched aunties enter and exit the bus, being pushed and shoved, ignored and looked at with sly condemning, pitying eyes. I wondered if any of these brown women were academic feminists of color? I wondered if any of them were bathroom attendants? I wondered if in the eyes and minds of some on that bus, we weren't in some ways interchangeable, disposable brown female labor, at best cute and exotic, at worst menacing targets for violence.

I wondered why I thought I had any right to conceive of myself as being in solidarity with this person as the same institutions I profit from might put my face on the Alumni magazine to gloss over her slave wage. There we both were in the bathroom at that moment, bearing a resemblance to each other not only in skin and face, but also in silence. Her silence born out of the unrelenting racism and sexism of an exploitative labor force. My silence born out of the guilty privilege that comes with too much education and the luxury of feeling bad before you get to leave the bathroom and go on with the rest of your life. I wished at least that she had been able to slip me a note. It might have said something like, "You Marxist, I clean toilet."

Photos provided by author



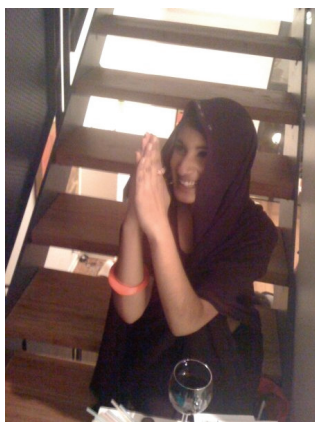
You Marxist, I....



"Kitchen's and Bathrooms. Toronto, 2009."



This was an event attended by a whole host of middle class left leaning liberals.



I broke character only to hand the audience various messages.



Sari, wrong number.



9/11 vs. 7/11.