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GWS 197F - 3: bell hooks: Beloved Community
December 8th, 2020
Word Count: 1903

The Impact of Patriarchy on Stud Lesbians

Intersectional feminism informed how literary scholar bell hooks understands and interacts with the world. As a result, feminism is deeply intertwined in all of her commentaries and sociocultural analyses. In her 2003 book *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, hooks writes about how male masculinity and blackness interact with each other in this society. Her proclivity towards feminism isn't restrained. A majority of the book is dedicated to understanding how toxic patriarchy has victimized and empowered black men, specifically seeking to examine their relationship with black women. However, black masculinity in women is an area that hooks does not address in her book. Black lesbians have a vibrant subculture that has been informed by and marginalized by black men. In understanding hooks' intersectional views on black men, it is important to also understand how black masculinity interacts with all aspects of gender. The purpose of this paper will be to examine, through bell hooks' understandings of black men, how masculinity and the patriarchy also shape the lives of black lesbians.

Stud and femme respectively, are the terms often used to refer to masculine-presenting and feminine presenting black lesbians (DiBartolo 2016). It is important to note, especially considering the stereotypes that follow black women, that not all black lesbians identify with masculinity and the stud subculture within the lesbian community. Many black women feel a disconnect from womanhood. Stud lesbians have found solace in a masculine identity by using masculinity or androgyny to indirectly protest against the commodified, heteropatriarchal, and Eurocentric femininity. Even the word "stud," like many terms, is a reclamation of

heteropatriarchal domination. It is the reclamation of a derogatory term and thus the reclamation and assertion of confidence in an identity outside the heteropatriarchal white-supremacy.

This willingness to live in the margins of society does not come without a price. Masculine lesbians are particularly vulnerable to patriarchal wrath because by not presenting feminine and not centering one's life around men they are doing the opposite of patriarchal expectations (Manders 2020). However, since masculinity is so valued in our society, this creates a paradox in which aspects of their masculinity are praised, but the body in which masculinity is being performed is not. This places masculine lesbians in a precarious position where a pseudo-male-adjacency may garner respect for them in certain areas, while simultaneously making them more vulnerable to stereotyping of black male aggression. Yet, they are not fully immune to sexism born from their womanhood.

Patriarchy is the establishment of male dominance in society. As Dr. hooks observes, the constant expectation of performing masculinity in a heteropatriarchal way is often what leads to the breakdown of black families. She traces the roots of gangster culture, sexual promiscuity, and domination within black men to be the constant threat their masculinity is under while existing in white supremacy. Dr. hooks solidifies this connection by stating “enslaved black men were socialized by white folks to believe they should endeavor to become patriarchs [to attain freedom]” (hooks 2004, 4). Therefore, the strive for equality and upwards mobility in black men is seen to be directly correlated with one's ability to perform masculinity. Dr. hooks calls this “dominator masculinity,” where black men often hold the weight of their self-worth. This masculinity is influenced by “plantation patriarchy,” (hooks 2004) or the kind of patriarchy black men observed white slave owners performing. This kind of masculinity comes at the expense of black women, whom both white and black men seek to assert their masculinity over by

dominating and abusing them. Dr. hooks writes that the indoctrination into patriarchal masculinity and the subsequent stereotyping of blackness and aggression have led to the creation of a self-fulfilling prophecy in which many black boys are raised to become dysfunctional adults. The success of this cyclical process is an example of how whiteness and white supremacy continue to be a dominating force in American society.

Stereotypes of masculine aggression also follow black lesbians. According to Manders (2020), black women are often perceived as masculine whether they intentionally present that way or not. This is in large part because femininity in the United States is defined by an anti-black white-supremacist patriarchy. This means the definition of womanhood is directly connected with and decided by cisheteronormative white men. Because of the stereotype that black men are aggressive, this culture associates black people with aggression and therefore masculinity.

Doroshwalther's documentary *Out in the Night*, (2014) clarifies the complex identity issues facing black lesbians in regards to masculine aggression. In the film, she documents a group of black lesbians who were arrested and charged with felony gang assault and attempted murder in 2006. Renata, one of the lesbians who was arrested, recounts how she achieved a sort of male-adjacency among her brothers with them even going as far as to call her their 'brister.' But her masculinity, when combined with her queerness and blackness, stands in direct opposition to what white supremacy believes black women should be. As a result, a simple self-defense case was exploited by the media as the women involved were widely claimed to be dangerous.

Black people have been stereotyped as violent for centuries. Whether unconsciously or not, the prevalence of this stereotype is often used as an excuse for racial profiling. For black

lesbians, particularly masculine ones, this means they are portrayed as ““violent homosexual aggressors”” (Pasulka 2016). This led many news outlets to call the lesbians various demonizing names like a ““wolf pack of killer lesbians,”” to paint the picture of a gruesome and unprovoked murder-attempt (2016). Negative perceptions of black lesbians are deeply ingrained in society and, as with this example, often have serious consequences. This case and subsequent media coverage was an attack on both their queerness and their blackness that ignored their womanhood, which was what made them need to use self-defense in the first place. This cherry-picking of the stud/masculine lesbian identity is exactly what makes them so vulnerable to white supremacy.

Reed and Valenti (2012) explain how black lesbians not only are sexually harassed or abused but often the added layers of oppressive heterosexism indicate the harassment was a result of their sexual identity. The study notes that many men share a common belief that ““if you get with me, you won’t be a lesbian no more”” (Reed and Valenti 2012, 709). This is a consequence of what Dr hooks (2004) identifies as a pattern of black men sexually acting out in response to the heteropatriarchal white-supremacy. She talks about how the sexual autonomy of black men has been co-opted by white men and women. For centuries, black men have been hypersexualized, demasculinized, and de-humanized by white supremacy. This leaves black men with generational sexual trauma, where the trauma of their predecessors informs how they interact with their sexuality. Dr. hooks (2004) observes this often takes the form of hypersexuality as their sense of identity being placed on their sexual prowess. Thus, the coercion of women regardless of, or perhaps because of, their sexuality, is often seen as manly. Many men view the coercion of lesbians to have sex with them as the ultimate proof of their sexuality and manhood.

This sexual exploitation of lesbians is another way society leaves them vulnerable to the heteropatriarchy. In many instances, it may not be safe to openly present as a lesbian. Reed and Valenti (2012) suggest that while “passing” as straight might be an option for feminine “femme” lesbians, masculine “stud” lesbians don’t have that luxury. Instead, they might try to pass as biologically male or assert validity in their lesbianism by acting more masculine. This is an example of how masculine black lesbians have had to understand the heterosexist patriarchy and find ways to exist in the system. In analyzing this survival tactic, it is important to understand this behavior is not simply complacency in the heterosexist patriarchy, nor is it attempting to introduce heterosexuality into lesbianism.

Heavy stereotyping of black identities does not only impact black women on an individual level. For a research article, Dr. Siobhan Brooks (2017) interviewed several black lesbians. She found that negative stereotypes about black women are believed by both masculine and feminine presenting lesbians. Out of the women she interviewed, masculine lesbians tended to assume more negative qualities in feminine lesbians and vice versa (Brooks 2017). These stereotypes are harmful not only because stereotypes are shallow and unrepresentative, but because a complacency in believing these stereotypes indicates how internalized misogyny has cultivated negative views of women and continues to assert a sex-based division. As Dr. hooks (2004) explains, race is often a uniting factor in black relationships, but sex continues to be a dividing one. She explains this by giving an example of the heterosexual family model with men objectifying women to gain patriarchal dominance and by extension self-worth, and women expecting men to prove their self-worth by upholding patriarchal stereotypes (hooks 2004, 117). The bias Brooks (2017) reveals in her interviews shows that gender performance is influenced by a white supremacist heteropatriarchal society regardless of its presence or absence in the home.

Dr. hooks's solution to toxic patriarchal domination is nebulously unhelpful in a judicial sense but may offer the individual the insight needed to change their behaviors. Her suggestion is that people make a mindful effort to shift from this unconsciously dysfunctional and destructive mindset by using love. Patriarchy is a system of domination, and as Dr. hooks states, "love is the antithesis of the will to dominate" (1996, 265). Dr. hooks notes that black people have learned to harden, hide, and repress vulnerability to survive. She says "the inability to be vulnerable means we are unable to feel. If we cannot feel then we cannot...know love" (hooks 2004, 122). In this way, much of the breakdown of relationships comes from an inability to love or the wrong understanding of love. Love as healing and self-empowerment is present throughout all of her writing. Time and time again she argues that love is "the transformative practice that will free black bodies and minds" (hooks 2013, 194). She lives out this theory daily by loving her community and loving herself and even extending love to those she speaks out against. At worst, Dr. hook's future transformed by love is idealistic. She once wrote, "There would be no unemployment problem in our nation if our taxes subsidized schools where everyone could learn to love" (hooks 2000, 162). In reference to this statement, critics said "the book's [*All About Love*] suggestions don't always jibe with reality" (Cruz 2000). While this is a fair statement, it's also important to recognize Dr. hooks advocates for political and social change in the individual. She writes sociocultural analyses and self-help books. If one can read her work and love their community in a way that defies the white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy, she has succeeded.

In *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, Dr. hooks suggests domination and white-supremacist patriarchy are at the heart of black male suffering. In this suffering, black lesbians share a unique kinship. The patriarchy dominates the intersection of all black lesbian identities. In this system, they have found ways to exist that both lessens and complicates their

marginalization. In order to eliminate oppression on black men and lesbians, one must consciously be anti-white-supremacist heteropatriarchy. Dr. hooks claims people can do this by loving themselves and their community. The all-encompassing importance of community and support systems should not be understated; all evidence is assured.

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