

THE MEANING OF MANHOOD

Jaeden C. Johnson '22

What does it mean to *be* a “man”? What violence might this ontological imposition require? How might this violence be forestalled or attenuated? These questions have held me far longer than I have held them. Their prevailing answers have informed my hesitance to hold and structured my reticence to be held. These answers hold like a holding cell. They expand and contract in accordance with hegemonic norms — norms that incessantly ungender, as the performance of white patriarchy’s volatile dance. In this paper, I attempt to loosen that dance’s violent grip in the provision of my own answers. Drawing primarily on feminist and Black feminist scholarship, I endeavor to survey contending conceptualizations of “manhood” and “masculinity” before reflecting on the substantive effects these concepts have had on my own emotional health and well-being.

In *Concepts in Male Health*, James E. Leone draws a distinction between “man” and “male,” defining the former simply as a “physically mature male,” and conceptualizing the latter as referring to the “biological traits of a person” (4). It is immediately apparent that this essentialist reduction of manhood to biology does violence to queer and trans folks who, by definition, exist outside of binarism, medico-juridical conceptualizations of gender. More than this, Leone’s failure to make even a conventional sociological distinction between gender and sex in his definition of manhood effaces the ways in which these categories persist as dynamic political, social, and cultural constructions. Leone does align, however, with contemporary sociological literature in his description of masculinity as “elusive” and historically contingent (4). This sentiment aligns with social scientific conceptualizations of hegemonic masculinity which we might define broadly, following W. L. Adamson, as “a process of continuous creation which, given its massive scale, is bound to be uneven in the level of legitimacy it commands” (Adamson 174). In this way, Leone rightly identifies masculine norms as existing in a perpetual state of socio-historical flux that is an invariable function power.

Leone subsequently elaborates his definition of masculinity, correctly asserting that “masculine norms have included being the provider, strong, silent, and practical, as well as *the*

opposite of the female norm” (4). This latter stipulation is important because it suggests that, despite its elusiveness, there remains one key means of knowing what form of masculinity is hegemonic in the status quo: the identification of its opposite. Western masculinity is incessantly defined over and against its feminine coeval. Moreover, patriarchy has a decisive impact on the terms and conditions of this differentiation. According to bell hooks, patriarchy is a “political system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right ... to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence” (18). Thus, as a function of what Terrence Real terms “psychological patriarchy,” the line between masculine and feminine behavior is interminably reproduced through a volatile “dance of contempt” in which “half of our human traits are exalted while the other half is devalued” (qtd. hooks, *The Will to Change*, 32-33).

Furthermore, in an article entitled “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt suggest that hegemonic masculinity dominates women *and* other men, subordinating not only femininity but other masculinities. This is evident in the way men and boys signal to others that they are masculine. According to C.J. Pascoe, this signaling appears “through practices of repudiation and confirmation” (Pascoe 177). Repudiation features mocking behaviors considered feminine, as well as taunting, and acting violently towards individuals who perform those behaviors. In studying what she calls “fag discourse,” Pascoe finds that the victims of homophobic slurs are not solely those who engage in same-sex relationships, but those simply deemed unintelligent, weak, or unathletic. Thus, the slur, “fag,” though invariably indicative of homophobia, also serves as a tool of repudiation for any behavior deemed “unmasculine,” and consequently reveals the forms of masculinity hegemonic in a certain context (177). It can also be noted that other insults such as “b*****” or “p*****” accomplish this same repudiation by invoking femininity directly. The degrading connotations of these words inculcate a general disdain for femininity, even amongst women. Acts of confirmation include what Pascoe calls, following Adrienne Rich, “compulsive heterosexuality” (Pascoe 179). This features objectifying women and engaging in both heterosexual and homosocial behaviors predicated upon dominating femme and feminine persons sexually. Such practices suggest that the only value femininity holds lies in its ability to affirm hegemonic (i.e. patriarchal) masculinity through sexual subordination. This dynamic inevitably contributes to a

culture of sexual assault and harassment, as men and boys constantly seek access to hegemonic masculinity and, thus, power, through the domination of femme and feminine bodies.

While Pascoe limits her study to cisgender males, it is worth noting that patriarchal behavior need not be gender specific. For bell hooks, patriarchy sustains itself through relations of “domination and submission, collusion and manipulation” requiring the participation of both men and women (qtd. in hooks, *The Will to Change*, 33). This can be seen, for instance, in the way discussions of gender equality by liberal feminists tend to idealize women adopting archetypically masculine behaviors and assimilating into powerful, traditionally patriarchal leadership roles and careers, rather than affirming social reproductive labor such as caretaking and sex work. While the former is seen as a progressive marker of gender equity and upward mobility, the latter either goes unconsidered or is indicted as regressive and degrading. This is, in part, what bell hooks attempts to combat in her often recited adage, “patriarchy has no gender” — to say nothing of the way cisgender (principally heterosexual) men and women mobilize transphobic and queer antagonistic rhetoric to reaffirm their gender and sexual identities, or of the way queer, trans, and nonbinary folks reproduce patriarchal gender and sexual norms in their own intimate partnerships and social interactions.

But perhaps we should backtrack a bit. What *is* gender and sex? Thus far, in surveying the sociological literature, Judith Butler might say that I have only mapped “a signification that an (already) sexually differentiated body assumes” — one that only exists in relation to its opposite (13). This, of course, begs the question: what constitutes sexual differentiation? While Leone and other social scientists might point to biology (e.g. chromosomes and genitalia), Butler lodges a post-structuralist critique of the human sciences themselves, contending that even the concepts we consider “natural” or “biological” cannot be isolated from the cultural matrices of language and intelligibility by which they are produced. Following Michel Foucault and Simone de Beauvoir, she posits not only that both gender *and* sex are cultural productions, but that gender “designates the very apparatus of production by which the sexes themselves are established” (Butler 11). Furthermore, she finds that several contending schools of French philosophy and feminism all agree on the notion that sexual difference appears in hegemonic discourse as a metaphysical “*substance*” (25) — and that this appearance conceals the fundamental impossibility of *being* a sex or gender. Following

Foucault, Butler theorizes this substance as an “ontology of accidental attributes” exposing identity itself to be “a regulatory fiction” (32). While she allows that this fictive construction incessantly consolidates itself through the compulsory performance of heterosexuality, she also warns that its coherence is constantly called into question by the “dissonant play of attributes that fail to conform” (32).

I would contend that one such attribute is Blackness. In her landmark essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” Black feminist scholar and literary critic, Hortense Spillers, suggests that African captives were “ungendered” in the hold of the slave ship. She posits that, under such conditions, “one is neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into ‘account’ as *quantities*” (Spillers 215). In other words, slavery’s “total objectification of the flesh” obliterates any prior notions of African personhood, including that of gender (Spillers 206-208). The “undecipherable” mark of the flesh that follows the womb from generation-to-generation unmakes the Western patriarchal categories of “mother,” “father,” and “family” (Spillers 207). Similarly, bell hooks elaborates on this point in her essay “Reconstructing Black Masculinity” by positing not only that transplanted Africans knew nothing of “the white colonizer’s notions of manhood and masculinity,” but that they were precluded from ever actualizing these patriarchal notions in the context of a “white racist economy” (*Black Looks*, 89-90). Moreover, both hooks and Spillers denote that Blacks were pathologized for being unable to achieve and maintain a coherent nuclear family structure, even as the legacy of forced natal alienation permeates American institutions from the plantation to the prison. To this point Spillers suggests that, for Black women, the “‘reproduction of mothering’ ... carries few of the benefits of a *patriarchalized* female gender, which, from one point of view, is the only female gender there is” (Spillers 216). This is to say that, in so far as Western notions of gender remain tethered to patriarchal notions of maternity and paternity, and in so far as these notions continue to constitute ‘the only gender there is,’ Black people remain ‘ungendered’ well into the present.

For bell hooks, this continued preclusion from the attainment of patriarchal gender norms is not entirely negative. This is namely because “patriarchy,” she posits, “is the single most life-threatening social disease assaulting the male body and spirit in our nation” (*The Will to Change*, 17). She argues that because Black men had to be taught patriarchal masculinity — because their sense of manhood has not always been defined by the “will to dominate and

colonize” others — that part of their healing is simply a matter of refusing the roles Western society has always imposed in bad faith (*We Real Cool*, 2). Without romanticizing the past, she challenges Black men to refuse the suicidal path that white bourgeois patriarchy has long refused to them, assuring that “in every segregated black community in the United States there are adult black men married, unmarried, gay, straight, living in households where they do not assert patriarchal domination and yet live fulfilled lives” (*Black Looks*, 93).

As someone both Black and assigned male at birth, I am constantly unlearning the toxic, domineering attitudes that have been inculcated in me from a young age. I have been so well trained to embrace stoicism and emotional distance that I can hardly remember the last time I cried. I played sports for so long and internalized so much of the degrading rhetoric and injunctions of my coaches that I now find it hard to dissociate working out from being punished. I have suffered so much emotional abuse at the hands of men that I experience difficulty maintaining friendships and being intimate and vulnerable with the people closest to me. I have been so influenced by my father’s demands for a protestant work ethic that I have often precluded myself from being more social and prioritizing basic self-care practices such as eating and sleeping over schoolwork. Furthermore, the entanglements of masculinity and compulsory heterosexuality have frequently scared me into silence regarding my queerness. However, the more adept I have become at naming these harmful behaviors the better I have become at addressing them and doing the work necessary to bring about my own healing. While I remain unsure what this healing may look like, I realize for now that the first step resides in articulating the desire to hold and be held differently.

Works Cited

- Adamson, W.L. *Hegemony and Revolution: A Study of Antonio Gramsci's Political and Cultural Theory*. University Press, 1980.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 2015.
- Connell, R. W., and James W. Messerschmidt. “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept.” *Gender and Society*, vol. 19, no. 6, 2005, pp. 829–859., www.jstor.org/stable/27640853.
- Hooks, Bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Routledge, 2015.
- Hooks, Bell. *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*. Simon & Schuster, 2005.
- Hooks, Bell. *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*. Routledge, 2004.
- Leone, James E. *Concepts in Male Health: Perspectives across the Lifespan*. Jossey-Bass, 2012.
- Pascoe, C.J. “‘Guys Are Just Homophobic’: Rethinking Adolescent Homophobia and

Heterosexuality.” *Introducing the New Sexuality Studies*, by Steven Seidman et al., Routledge, 2011, pp. 175–182.

Spillers, Hortense J. *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*. Univ. of Chicago Press, 2003.