

Meischa Sineno

Dr. Vilalon

Sociology of Gender

8 December 2020

Analytical Book Review – Black Sexual Politics

Patricia Hill Collins' work on the social construction of gender and sexuality should be understood in the context of social control and domination. Throughout *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, we witness Hill Collins' mastery of the black standpoint and are shown why she's considered one of the most significant sociological thinkers of our time. Her argument focuses on the new way racism operates and the consequences of racist stereotypes and images that hinder the freedom of black sexual expression. As is with all Hill Collins' work, intersectionality discourse is central too. Hill Collins suggests that true liberation can only occur when Eurocentric ideology and racist tactics are challenged by black people who understand how sexism, racism, and homophobia are formed against them to ensure their subjugation and division. She makes the case that the legacy of slavery is the continued control and oppression of black bodies. This has created a middle class of black people who value respectability over genuine sexual expression, ultimately leading to widespread homophobia. This division, Hill Collins' argues, will stifle the growth of the community as a whole.

Combahee River Collective's "A Black Feminist Statement" introduces an activist perspective on the struggle to gain liberation in a white, male, heterosexual world. Like much of Hill Collins' work, the Combahee River Collective highlights the value of black women's personal experiences in combating racial and gender stereotypes. The fundamental argument

made in *Black Sexual Politics* is that sexual, physical, and emotional violence has become a normalized occurrence in the history of both male and female African Americans as a means of control and dominance. The Combahee River Collective mentions white gender expectations of being “ladylike” to make black women more objectionable and vulnerable to violence from white men in particular. Secondly, the Combahee River Collective talks about the “craziness” felt by black feminists before they became educated about the dangers of white patriarchal rule. This is another fundamental parallel in *Black Sexual Politics*. Hill Collins’ suggests that the black community is complicit in their acceptance of white ideology when they adhere to white ideas of respectability. She believes that adherence to respectability politics dismisses black history’s uniqueness and expression and only deepens the black community’s division.

We certainly cannot discuss Hill Collins’ work without providing a commentary about the problems with the inevitability of whiteness and acceptance of white knowledge as the dominant ideology in society. Ironically, I will use one of her other works to do this. The excerpt from *Black Feminist Thought* in our textbook discusses the usefulness of black women’s knowledge in empowering an entire marginalized community. *Black Sexual Politics* also calls for social transformation of economic, political, and social systems if we hope to advance the black collective expression. Specifically, Hill Collins argues that white-dominated media disseminate their desired ideology and spread offensive and exaggerated racial and gender stereotypes like Jezebel, Mammy, Uncle Tom, and the welfare queen . These stereotypes cause a lack of black role models for youth and contribute to the widespread invalidation of the black sexual and gender experience. Without stories told by black people for black people, there is less accuracy in the narrative about black reality. This is where **epistemology** comes in. The excerpt

from *Black Feminist Thought* explains the necessity of black women academics and the everyday black women who are mothers, teachers, employees, and sexual beings.

Audre Lorde's piece "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" chiefly discusses women's unrecognized eroticism and need for suppression in western society. Traditional gender ideology requires that women should be suspicious of this sexuality and keep a distance from spaces where free sexual expression is welcome. Lorde argues that a woman's real power is harnessed in this erotic and they are perceived as dangerous when they exercise this part of themselves. Hill Collins' lengthy commentary of LGBTQ people's experiences can also be used here along with women. Hill Collins asserts that one of the greatest hindrances to the black community's advancement in black sexual politics is their silencing of LGBTQ people. This has dire consequences too. Not only are black LGBTQ people forced to lead closeted double lives, some often must suffer from HIV/AIDS out of shame and fear. Both writers would likely argue that their people's silence and shunning play directly into the desires of white, heterosexual men who hope to divide and confine black women and LGBTQ people economically and politically. Lorde states that the eros is both spiritual and political. In Lorde's view, the two cannot be disentangled. Hill Collins builds on this with her analysis that becoming in tune with authentic sexuality begins with freedom in so many ways.

In *Black Sexual Politics*, Hill Collins discusses the little representation in media of "real" black people. She writes that black actors and actresses are often rewarded for portraying images that have come to be what white people have stereotyped them as. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, this lends to a lack of black role models in media. It also contributes to the further development of aggressive, hostile racial types like the ugly bitch who acts like a man, the bad mother, or the more respectable middle-class woman who adheres to the traditional ladylike

gender roles praised by white people. Enter Ariane Cruz's "(Mis)playing Blackness: Rendering Black Female Sexuality in Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl" about Issa Rae and the power of awkwardness. Cruz explains that Rae challenges our traditional understanding of black female sexuality by humanizing her character with relatable awkwardness. It is the contradictory presentation of respectability, sensuality, and outsidership that deracializes Rae in a way that Hill Collins would likely admire. Providing a story about a black girl's free sexual expression, gender fluidity in presentation with humor works to humanize. It also challenges the traditional depictions of black womanhood. This has to be what Hill Collins was advocating for when she explained the utility in divergence from white ideology. Work like this undoubtedly brings in groundbreaking representation that can unite black boys and girls who see their sexual or gender experiences in Rae. This is what Hill Collins argues is a fundamental step in uniting the black community's authentic eros.

Lastly, to finish our discussion on spirituality, knowledge, and violence, I bring in Aurora Levin Morales' "Radical Pleasure: Sex and the End of Victimhood" to highlight the parallels of violence slavery and Morales' experiences. Like Hill Collins' telling of the systematic breakdown of slaves spiritually and sexually, Morales talks of her sexual abuse as a calculated manipulation designed to rip away her sense of integrity with torture. We know that white people during Chattel Slavery broke down the bodies of both misbehaving black men and women. Slaves learned through humiliation, like Morales, that their body and sexuality were not theirs to claim. Both sexualities were seen as untrustworthy. In Morales' piece, she reclaims sex in a way that Hill Collins' advocates for. Both authors express the powerfulness of open vulnerability and intimacy. It humanizes people. The remnants of slavery and the degradation of black people can be found everywhere in our society, but both authors advocate for the dismissal of the victim

role. Of course, I am not insinuating that black people see themselves as victims. If we follow Hill Collins' argument, we must reiterate the dangers of accepting gender and sexuality ideology from the dominant group if they hope to reclaim gender and sex in a meaningful way to their experience.