



WHEN BLACK MALE MEETS QUEER: PRAXIS AND DYNAMICS OF BLACK MASCULINITY AND QUEER IN GENDER & SEXUALITY STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

With the rise of gay liberationist movement in the post-Stonewall era, overtly 'gay' and 'lesbian' perspectives began to be put forward in the nexus of 'new gender studies'. If 'queer studies' as an umbrella term has already raised an entire set of questions and issues about identity, sexuality, race, desire, and gender, 'black queer studies' attempts to zoom in the fraught relations among and between these often overlapping narratives of black and queer identities. Work on 'men and masculinities' are unable to evolve into a discourse in its own right, unlike work on women and femininity, which evolved into the discourse of feminism. Where feminism emerged out of political engagement with women and femininity as an ideological stance, as much as a set of conceptual and philosophical discourses, work on 'men and masculinity' resists being located under the singular rubric category, say, 'masculinism', because of the ideological and political baggage that the term carries historically.

This paper argues the queer project marks an effort to speak from and to the differences, nuances and 'invisibility' that are eclipsed by the underplay of the gender binary oppositions. This proposal is critically curious to probe into the matter that what happens when black masculinity soaks up the attention of queer and become 'queered' black male. Black gay identity overlaps with 'despecified' queer. Treating 'Queer' as an anti-assimilationist and anti-separatist with the overlapping of the narrative discourse of race, this paper seeks to engage with 'othered' masculinities, presumably 'queered', that not only in terms of the attributes that characterize them but also in terms of the historical, structural and discursive conditions, interrelation and 'intersectional' dynamics that foster their formation, formulation and reproduction.

Keywords: Gender, Black Masculinities, Heteronormativity, Invisibility, Queer, Sexuality.

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With the upsurge of seemingly maverick gay liberationist movement or men's liberation in the post-Stonewall era that employed a version of liberalism in its concern with individual and psychic aspects of gendered habits, attitudes, etiquettes and

mannerisms, overtly the gender terminologies such as 'gay', 'lesbian', 'bisexual', 'transgender', and 'queer' came into elitist consideration in the nexus of critical masculinity studies. Not surprisingly, the relationship that ostensibly surfaces between men's

liberation movement and critical masculinity studies is somewhat equivocal as the former relied more on the psychological and support-oriented approach than a political one, the latter (Beasley 179). Raewyn Connell, one of the leading masculinity studies theorists, offers different configurations of masculinity including 'hegemonic masculinity', 'complicit masculinity', 'subordinate masculinity' and 'marginalized masculinity' (Connell 76). But before moving on to the critical assessment of those configurations of masculinity, Connell added four kinds of strategies to characterize the type of person who appears to be 'masculine'. This tactical attempt contributes well to the construction of masculinity politics and helps further for the understanding of the gender relations among men involved. They include essentialist, positivist, normative and semiotic definitions of masculinity which are to be evaluated shortly. To begin with, essentialist definitions of masculinity came under critical scrutiny. Since it has been familiar to all and sundry that 'masculinity' exists only in contrast to the existence and subordination of 'femininity' or 'other', so to say, and thereby, the closed phallogocentric binary frame results with the compulsory condition of its arbitrary relationality. The crux in this strategy rests on the essence of the core masculine which, later, proved to be only a social construct, as said beforehand. Therefore, the persistent oversimplification in making sense of masculinity as a whole leads itself to a vacuum. Secondly, positivist definitions of masculinity perched on the ethnographic scaling of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' in the academy of humanities and social sciences. But this ethnographical survey, though meticulous in its approach, falls short for its attempt to introduce the names of the gender categories. Precisely, the descriptions that are given to characterize 'masculinity' and 'femininity' having recourse to the terminologies of the same names bring themselves into the epistemological sophistry. This falsified notion occurs only when one resorts to the terms of artificial binary opposition to make its own sense. The much-discussed terms 'masculinity' and 'femininity' now appear redundant to express the contradictions such as 'masculine female' or 'feminine male' because the binary of 'male' and

'female', though questionable, is in sync with the sex differences. Thirdly, normative definitions of masculinity often lean toward essentialist agendas but it produces 'paradox' due to its deep-seated anxiety which disables the person so that he could not inwardly meet the social needs of 'toughness' or 'aggression' which the agents of society want the person to fulfill. Lastly, semiotic approaches address masculinity as a number of symbolic differences. In Lacanian psychoanalysis femininity is defined by 'lack', i.e., not having the phallus and masculinity is defined as possessing the phallus and thereby, this semiotic realm in various ways upsets the phallogocentric nature of positivist and normative accounts of masculinity (Connell 70). Coming back to the configurations of masculinity presented by Connell, hegemonic masculinity is something that captures the dominant version of masculinity in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always in the process of change. Hegemonic patterns of masculinity do not necessarily mean that only powerful people occupy this position. It is also capitalized by some who are far from certain power differentials but yet remain, for a while, hegemonic in relation to the subordinates in that particular community in terms of other axes of difference. When patriarchal defense mechanism changed its one-dimensional 'straight' attitude which have predominated as one of the power tools from time immemorial, new groups of men and their marches and campaigns started challenging the historic convictions of gender and sexuality. Furthermore, the historical configuration of the patterns of masculinity proves to be changing not only for its politics of hegemony but more on its quicksilver character of change in its mobilization of the seemingly new construction. Complicit masculinity is, as Connell postulates in *Masculinities*,

a slacker version of hegemonic masculinity- the difference between the men who cheer football matches on TV and those who run out into the mud and tackle themselves...Marriage, fatherhood and community life often involve extensive compromises with women rather than naked domination or an uncontested display of authority (79).

In general, complicit masculinity does not enact the hegemonic pattern but enjoys it passively for its own benefit the way the middle-aged men usually advise the young boys in a neighborhood, as an instance. Thirdly, subordinate masculinity includes the dominance of heterosexual men over the homosexuals. Since gayness is defined as something which does not conform to the heterosexist ideology, homosexuality lost its priority. Last but not the least, marginalized masculinity involves those people whose preferred sexual orientations do not reach at the limelight due to their racial subjugation to the current hegemonic fashion. Though their sexual orientations, black homosexuality, in particular, tried to subvert the politics of (hetero) sexual reproduction but fell prey even to this politics time and again due to their embodied racial demarcation.

Though Connell is very serious about sexuality, gay men, in particular, but sexuality still tends to operate as a negative border marker rather than as active contributor to the formation of masculinity, hegemonic masculinity and the gender order as a whole. Despite of the poignant diversity in Connell's different set of masculinities, race/ethnicity is surprisingly missing in his collection of works. Despite of certain loopholes in his work, Connell projects a link between race/ethnicity and masculinity. He refers to a hegemonic form "that embodies, organizes and legitimates men's domination in the world gender order as a whole" (261). This height of masculinity in the current global order takes the pattern of what Connell calls 'transnational business masculinity' (xxiii) that is underlined by egocentrism, conditional commitments, declining ethical concerns (Beasley 214).

This proposal analyses not only the cultural praxis of black masculinity, black male parenting and black family framework but the matrices of intersectional politics of race and masculinity, its formation of black gay identity and various gendered narratives' interaction rather than mere intersection among themselves in the light of queer theoretical lens. If queer theory as an umbrella term has already raised an entire set of questions and issues about identity, sexuality, race, desire, and

gender, 'black queer studies' attempts to zoom in the fraught relations among and between these often overlapping narratives of black and queer identities. Research works on 'men and masculinities' are unable to evolve into a discourse in its own right, unlike work on women and femininity, which evolved into the discourse of feminism. Where feminism emerged out of political engagement with women and femininity as an ideological stance, as much as a set of conceptual and philosophical propagandas, work on 'men and masculinity' resists being fixated under the singular category, say, 'masculinism', because of the ideological and political baggage that the term carries historically.

The queer project marks an effort to speak from and to the differences, nuances and different modes of masculinity which are oftentimes eclipsed by the sinister devices of gender binaries. Treating queer as a non-assimilationist and non-separatist approach instead of as merely trans-historicizing descriptor of sex with the overlapping of the racist and sexist narratives, this paper seeks to engage with 'othered' masculinities, black gay male, in particular, not only in terms of the attributes that characterize them but also in terms of the historical, structural and discursive conditions, interrelations and interactional-intersectional dynamics that foster their formation, formulation and their reproduction.

Kobena Mercer and I. Julian argued that "whiteness and its violent denial of difference" serve a vital foundation in masking social and economic inequalities in contemporary western cultures (206). Excluding the people who are compartmentalized and sidelined racially, "whiteness" has played a pertinent role in maintaining and naturalizing a hierarchical pattern of social matrix and a hegemonic/subordinate worldview. Sadly, whiteness has operated as a universal category, though fallacious by nature, which conceals its own specific axiology, value judgments, epistemology, and other cultural traits in the garb of a non-racialised, ostensibly colorless human nature. The ubiquitous nature of "whiteness" has become so widespread due to its non-presence, its invisibility, rather invisible omnipresence, so to say. Richard Dyer critically interprets this argument in his iconoclastic

analysis of representations of “whiteness’ in mainstream U.S. and Britain film, “white power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular’ (44). Further, he explains that whereas black, always a color marker, refers to particular objects and qualities, white does not; it ‘is not anything really, not an identity, not a particularizing quality, because it is everything-white is no color because it is all colors’ (142). Like Dyer, Morrison rightly says in her analysis of canonical U.S. literature when she follows that the invisible omnipresent of ‘whiteness’ has engendered a literary “language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony and dismissive othering” (x-xi).

To speak of racism in an oblique manner, racism may come under two poles – institutional racism and structural racism. Institutional racism takes place between and within institutions. It is based on discriminatory treatment, insidious politics and pseudo-distributive justice. On the other hand, structural racism is then legitimization and naturalization of an array of dynamics- historical, socio-political, cultural and interpersonal that regularly privileges Eurocentric whites while producing cumulative and chronic adverse outcomes for people of color. It is a system of hierarchical power, primarily marked by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy –especially power for the whites at the cost of Black, Latino, Chicano, Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American, Arab and other minority oppressed sections of the global village. Race is a shifting and ever-changing category, being historically time-specific because the meaning of race is explicated as well as contested throughout society, in terms of both collective action and personal practice. Consequently, the racial categories which came out of the closet are themselves are transformed, destroyed, and re-formed in a different dimension.

The binary pair of “white” and “black” was understood as perennial, trans-historical racial signifiers suggesting discrete groups of people, they are not. It was not until around 1680 with the racialization of slavery that the term was used to describe a specific group of people which suggests the white race’s emergence in opposition to but

simultaneously with the black race. African American people attempted to upset the chokehold body-soul killing situations meted out to themselves by the whites aligning with other sects of African descent. But this lukewarm, if not radical, semi-flamboyance got conditioned psychically that resulted in failure to overcome the racist and sexist stereotypes that went operating even within their volatile approach. The underplay of supreme racist ideological discourses concoct various discriminations in terms of race, sex, masculinity, class which are grounded on falsified generalizations concerning physical appearance and other social attributes. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr., comments:

The sense of difference defined in popular usages of the term “race” has both described and inscribed differences of language, belief system, artistic tradition, and gene pool, as well as sorts of supposedly natural attributes such as rhythm, athletic ability, celebration, usury, fidelity, and so forth. The relation between ‘racial character’ and these sorts of characteristics has been inscribed through tropes of race, lending the sanction of God, biology, or the natural order to even presumably biased descriptions of cultural tendencies and differences (5).

This institutionalized use of ‘race’ is based on insidious intent, for it thingifies the spectral discourses already circulating in and through American culture.

Stereotypes of black masculinity, characterized by poverty, lack of rational faculty, physicality, lawlessness, lying, capacity for violence, rapaciousness, were apt justifications for slavery that had contributed to the subsequent structural inequalities and to the fearful imaginations projected onto black men. This orientalist kind of representation makes enslavement a striking factor in shaping the black masculinity in the US. As time went by, the critical consciousness on the issue of black masculinity came to the fore but that got blurred with strategic playing of the patriarchal masculinity as hooks rightly points out:

Individual charismatic black male leaders with a radical consciousness often become so enamored of their unique status as the black man who is different that they fail to

share the good news with other black men. Or they allow themselves to be co-opted-seduced by the promise of greater monetary rewards and access to mainstream power that are the payoffs for pushing a less radical message. (xiv)

Significantly, the issue of black male parenting came closer to the debate of gender equality in the black American households throughout the nineties. Hegemonic patriarchy's refusal to appoint unemployed black males in employment while providing black females a place in the service economy created a context where black males and females could not conform to their sexist roles. Consequently, the notion that black males are symbolically castrated has been emphasized with the increase in the number of female bread winners, the 'matriarchal leaders', so to say. Black boys in the family in the nineties onwards tend to come across "a genocidal street culture" that takes place in their early childhood days and various educational institutions where they got the miasma of the "gangsta" culture of patriarchy that passed on as a cultural trait in the black boys to channelize them into becoming subordinate masculinities (hooks 38). Early in the twentieth century black masculinities struggled to generate an alternate sexual visibility that embarked on hedonistic pleasures and liberatory approach. But the image of emasculated black bodies are so entrenched in the cultural fantasy that black parents take it into account to toughen their black boys lest they should feel suffocated in their premature and later stages. The precarious and hideous character that the black boys should learn and internalize in themselves as quickly as possible becomes the norm of the black community. Due to the symbolic castration of the black males resultant female bread winners started parenting their black boys which awkwardly create a state of fearfulness in the boys' psyche not to becoming a castrated adult 'man', a state of being, but to stay uncastrated black 'boy', a state of becoming, in the lap of his 'matriarch'. The white centered patriarchy is embedded even in the black mothers' parenting which continues to reinforce the pathological narcissism in the adolescent boys. This matriarchal regulation in the

black family contributes to the praxis and dynamics of black masculinity, to a large extent.

Black masculinity has been conceptualized in various ways, one of them is cool pose. Cool pose is a ritualized form of masculinity entailing behaviors, scripts, physical strength, expression management and carefully crafted 'performances' that offer a single critical message- pride, strength and control. This kind of strategic approach results from the efflorescence of the black church in the community. While the black church historically had played a crucial role in attempting to achieve racial equality and social justice for the black community, black gays are not likely to see support but oppression within as Connell rightly says:

Oppression positions homosexual masculinities at the bottom of a gender hierarchy among men. Gayness, in particular ideology, is the repository of whatever is symbolically expressed from hegemonic masculinity, the items ranging from fastidious home decoration to receptive and pleasure. Hence, from the point of view of hegemonic masculinity, gayness is assimilated into femininity (37).

There is a stark difference between homosexual masculinity described above and the hyper masculinity that is perpetuated by the black church, the linchpin of black American communal life. Since femininity is assimilated into the gay bodies, gay masculinities always were expected to be passive subservient to the hegemonic masculinity. But Garry Dowsett outlines a relationship between gay masculinities and critical masculinity studies and further notes that taking gay masculinities into account enables a complete appreciation of the arborescent character of masculinity as well as its provisionality and shifting nature. Gay masculinity, characterized by its non-inevitable status leads to a kind of temporal achievement. Ian Roberts, exemplar of Dowsett's analysis, a famous Australian professional Rugby player, highlights the complexity of masculinity in displaying a hyper-masculine yet gay body and documenting this sort of exemplar, he offers an analysis in which gay body is not simply the passive boundary marker of heterosexual masculinity but also strikingly contributes to the

construction of masculinities especially in relation to construction of desirability and body image (Beasley 216). It is quite possible to trace a linkage of gay masculinity writings with race/ethnicity masculinity studies that indicates problems with the notion of benefits rather than costs arising from their legitimacy of masculine spaces. Major interest has been vested on to the race than to the gender as inattention to race was considered as betrayal to the ethnic communities.

Connell has an alignment with class structure that leads to the understanding of his version of social constructionism. This particular approach concentrates on the differentiation within social categories, particularly, class stratification while also drawing attention to macro structural hierarchies in power. His approach embossed on the diversity within masculinity, to multiple masculinities, while remaining strongly focused upon the overall hierarchical positioning of men as a group in relation to women as a group (Beasley 222-3). This atypical reading of macro power play refuses the cookie-cutter definitions of the oppositional concepts. The unique social constructionist approach that Connell offered is somewhat detached from Brod's version of social constructionism, which is inclined to retain a unitary account of masculinity to interrogate the gender power rather than to pay heed to the diversity within masculinity studies (Beasley 223). Brod's categorical approach is based on the absolutist idea of radical pro-feminist social constructionism which has some links with gender theorizing of John Stoltenberg. Regarding all these various approaches to gender and masculinity, Chris Beasley specifically termed Connell's version 'relational social constructionism' (223).

There are two types of pro-feminist method including radical pro-feminism advocated by Stoltenberg and socialist pro-feminism by Connell. Radical pro-feminism has died out with other revolutionary approaches. It has largely become a topic that got eclipsed in its concern on overtly absolutist agenda and politics of categorical pleasure. Radical pro-feminists' antagonism to the social category of masculinity on the grounds that it is a positioning stepped in violence and injustice and

is therefore irredeemable - has frequently been viewed as inducing a politics of guilt, antagonism to men and as kowtowing to feminism (Newton 24). Unlike radical pro-feminist perspective, socialist pro-feminist views mar the category of 'men' and men's power. Dismantling the category of 'men' enables Connell to show the interests that some men share with at least some women as in childcare provisions. These debates result in a refusal to cast masculinity as an essentialist unit. Having discussed the pro-feminist issues, Connell comes to know that gender category-based concepts cannot encapsulate the intricacies of gender in all totality and thus risks encouraging the homogeneous generalizations. Connell characterizes his work as a 'structural' approach in contrast to the 'discursive' foundation of postmodern masculinity theorizing (Beasley 226). Postmodern analyses of masculinity are too spectral and cannot amply acknowledge the situational specificity of the production of gender.

Now, queer approaches in masculinity studies speak of the possible limitations of both gender and sexuality. This method concentrates on avoiding any reduction of masculinity to the male body, and to men. This very narrative is postmodern and queer, for it critically interrogates macro levels of power, identity, gender, and sexuality. In viewing masculinity studies without men, without male-born bodies, this perspective is at odds with the critical masculinity studies as Halberstam opines that "those which do not interpret masculinity as a synonym for men or maleness are indeed few and far between" (12). The way maleless masculinity positioning stands in the masculinity studies brings it closer to the non-essential queer positionality. Queer appears as a product of time-specific movement and a set of theoretical pressures that speculate on the incoherence of lesbian and gay identity. The ubiquitous discontent with that version of identity politics which is advocated in both liberationist and ethnic models of homosexuality is generated not only by a sense of resistance to a new white (homo)normativity but also by an understanding of complex interworking of identity and power as Halperin argues in *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* that

...gay life has generated its own disciplinary regimes, its own technique of normalization, in the form of obligatory haircuts, shirts, dietary practices, body piercing, leather accoutrements, and physical exercise... the shift away from a liberation model of gay politics reflects a deepened understanding of the discursive structures and representational systems that determine the production of sexual meanings, and that micromanage individual perceptions in such a way as to maintain and reproduce the underpinnings of heterosexist privilege (32).

Therefore, the cultural fantasy of heterosexual sensibility continues to exist within the gay subcultures, gay-friendly communities which went on alarming that there is no way out from the gender binaries. Treating queer as something which both resisting and celebrating assemblage of assimilation and separation, it can be argued that the queer project tenaciously pays an effort to many axes of difference that have been extinguished by the homo-hetero binary, an effort to unburden the monolithic identities "lesbian" and "gay" including the intricate ways lesbian and gay sexualities are inflected by heterosexuality, race, gender, and ethnicity. Being 'anti-assimilationist' and 'anti-separatist' at the same time, queer may exclude lesbians and gay men whose identification with community and identity marks a relatively recent legitimacy, but include all those whose sexual identifications are not considered as sanctioned.

The history of masculinity is not at all straightforward. There is no clear-cut chronology of masculinity and no one-dimensional shift from traditional to modern configurations of masculinity as such. The power dynamics in the historical construction of masculinity kept on changing with situational intersection and interaction as well. The regulatory process of patriarchal devices does not display the explicit masculinity politics. A host of institutions which involved in the remaking of the stereotypical expressions of masculinity and gender becomes quite sufficient to routinely maintain the invisible politics as Butler in *Gender Trouble* rightly said that "there is no gender identity behind the

expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results" (33). The self-reproductive politics of masculinity camouflaged itself to all and sundry on the pretext of "national security, or corporate profit, or individual freedom, or international competitiveness, or economic efficiency, or the advance of science" (Connell 213). Queer approaches dealing with the issues of identity, sexuality lead to a despecification of those identities. Since the identities of any sort do not have any intrinsic relationship among themselves due to their dependency on oppositional relationality the identities tend to stay at utter loss. The constant process of despecifying those identities has come under the purview of post-queer perspectives in which the theoretical impulse to despecify various identities has changed into a respecification of those identities. This politics of respecification comes to the fore due to an argument in post-queer theory that queer carries an 'apolitical' nature in it and its impulse to de-essentialize became another universal paradigm. Despite of some limitations in queer approaches found out in the post-queer position, if necessary, queer's despecification of identity always plays a pivotal role and it encapsulates a queer assemblage of probable variant meanings, productions, interactions, interrelations when different configurations of black masculinity discussed earlier meet and merge with the non-essential queer phenomenon in terms of race, sex and masculinity, in particular, and gender and sexuality studies, in general.

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