

A history of hurt: locating the experiences and subjectivities of living patriarchy for lesbian women in rural areas.

Response to ‘Living patriarchy: Below the belt, above the waist. Investigating and exploring lesbian lives in two rural areas’.

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Firstly, Triangle must be commended for the potentially transformational work it has undertaken in attempting to tell the stories (and intervene in) of arguably the most marginalised group of women in South Africa. It is such work which reminds us that a post-colonial feminist approach to gender is not only necessary, but fundamental if we aim to give real meaning to principles of democracy and freedom for women. It is also such work which challenges mainstream epistemologies about gender and sexuality.

Challenging and transforming the legal system is only one aspect of an integrated approach to transforming meanings we attach to gender and sexuality, and the violence that often accompanies these meanings, in a country struggling to develop its democracy. Implementing legislation, as critical as this is, must be accompanied by other strategies which promote transformation in the lived realities of women, and rural women, in particular.

The report by Triangle, written by Karin Koen, raises important issues about ‘identities in transition’. It asks whether “current gender and sexual identities” are

challenging, or reinforcing and maintaining, binaries of maleness and femaleness and manhood and womanhood. The narratives of the women interviewed in Paarl and Worcester, suggest that heteronormative and heterosexist ideas of masculinities and femininities often define the kinds of relations between lesbian women in partnerships. This points to deep internalisation of the often violent heterosexist frame, the living of patriarchy, which operates mostly invisibly, but centrally, in a global context. It points to the ways that women's fear of *being* has become normalised within the heteropatriarchy that defines our lives, if we don't have the tools to recognise and challenge it. Inflexible feminist theories which ignore the interrelatedness of multiple inequalities based on constructions of race, class, geographical locations, and the specificity of rural women's lives, erase the possibility of understanding the kinds of hate black lesbians experience in their lived realities.

The report notes that "violence appears to be about as common among lesbian couples as among heterosexual couples" and that "the cycle of violence occurs in both types of relationships." Perhaps it isn't really surprising that the capitalist heteropatriarchal frame which survives on dichotomies of 'us/them' and 'self/other' reveals its illness in women loving women. This frame is rooted in human arrogance and hurting the other - hurting animals, plants, the environment and old people or senior citizens, the violence of colonisation. Is it logical then within this frame that black people hurt each other, as the xenophobic attacks reveal? Is the violence black lesbian women inflict on each other somehow indicative of hurting the self, in seeing elements of the marginalised and erased self in your female partner? Is this kind of violence not justified by the only tools provided by the heteropatriarchal frame?

The inability of linking black lesbian women's subjectivity to the heteromale culture, as reflected in the violence black lesbians inflict on each other, as indicated in the report, means that stepping out of the frame is impossible without

political and subjective tools. What kinds of tools do black women, and lesbian women in rural areas in particular, need in order to survive, to take care of their minds and bodies?

The mirroring of the male/female dichotomy of heterosexual relationships in lesbian partnerships suggests the internalization of mostly uncritiqued heteromasculine norms, in similar ways to how heterosexual women perform the feminine in ways reinforcing heteropatriarchy. The reification of heteromasculine ideas about 'skin-to-skin' sex, and the resistance by more 'male' identified lesbians to use safer sex methods reflects the damaging uptake of male behaviours which result in HIV and STI transmission. The taking up of damaging heteromasculine ways of being by women who identify themselves as 'butch' is as dangerous as the uncritiqued performance of heteromascularity by men.

The mainstream media plays a huge role in the reification of heterosexuality as normative. The reinforcement of certain kinds of racialised heterofemininities and heteromascularities as 'ideal' and aspirational leave little space and incentive for women and men to be different from the norm. Institutionalised heterosexism either marginalises, distorts or erases lesbian subjectivities altogether.

How do we take positive representations into rural areas? Exhibitions are often located in the city where infrastructure for these kinds of showings exists. Where the possibilities for bringing women from rural areas into the city are available, as the AWID (Association for Women in Development) conference should present, it is made impossible by high registration costs which NGOs cannot afford. This closes off any engagement of feminist consciousness for young black lesbians from rural areas such as Worcester and Paarl.

The report raises the assumption that lesbians are automatically feminist, and that this is a question that activists and others need to grapple with. While this assumption is an illogical one, what should be grappled with is how we provide

black lesbian women in rural areas with the personal-political tools to live healthy relationships and healthy lives. It is feminist tools, relevant to the realities of black lesbian women, which might be seen as critical to the process of educating women about their bodies, their health and their roles in relationships.

Research needed

There is a need for national empirical research to ascertain the scale of hate crimes against lesbians in the country, as well as the scale of violence between women within lesbian partnerships. The report highlights the need for research in terms of different experiences of victimisation between those who are more male identified and those who are more female identified. This kind of research would shed light on the different ways in which heteromascularity constitutes itself in perhaps different ways when confronted with lesbian women subjects who are understood as challenging what it means to be a man.

Urgent intervention

Safe spaces for women, and lesbian women in particular, within rural communities.

There needs to be constant education located in rural areas around women's rights, gender and sexual rights, all in terms of a post-colonial understanding of living patriarchy.

Health care providers need training in understanding gender and sexuality within a post-colonial framework. But this also needs to happen at tertiary level.

There needs to be a policy enforcing gender and sexuality education in primary and high schools. This means that teachers need to be educated at tertiary level about gender and sexuality.

We need to develop lesbian-affirmative media where lesbians see themselves as they want to be seen. NGOs need to collaborate in providing skills to lesbian women in rural areas to develop their own media.

Conferences which take place in South Africa need to include as a point of priority, the involvement and input of women in rural areas.