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“PATRIARCHY”: A BLACK FEMINIST CONCEPT

Matty Hemming

Vexy Thing: On Gender and Liberation by Imani Perry.
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The concept of patriarchy inhabits a fraught position within the history of feminist thought. While recent years have seen a resurgence of the term’s use within popular culture, with media coverage of the US-originated women’s march producing headlines such as “The Twenty Best Protest Signs to Dismantle the Patriarchy This Weekend,” the concept has not always held such seemingly evident descriptive appeal.¹ Women of color feminists have long decried the term’s single-issue focus on gender-based inequalities conceptualized within a US-based academy, suggesting that “patriarchy” offers little of use to a more radical, transnational, and context-specific critique of power’s workings. Not so, according to Imani Perry’s *Vexy Thing: On Gender and Liberation* (2018). In this generative and at times breathtakingly sharp work of interdisciplinary Black feminist theory, Perry argues that not only do we need analyses of “patriarchy” in order to practice feminism, but that the term can be used to do precisely what it has seemed to foreclose: it can account for the “layers of domination” produced by globalized systems of inequality. Responding both to what she regards as the vagueness of current popular usage of the concept, as well as the fraught problematic of its universalizing potentiality, Perry re-tools the term to be simultaneously more specific *and* more

capacious, her methodologically and historically ambitious project drawing citational energy from a still undervalued, she argues, corpus of radical Black and women of color theorists.

Often choosing the less specific “feminism” and sometimes “liberation feminism” as key terms, Perry makes a subtle argument: she assumes, or rather implicitly asserts, that “feminism,” “liberation,” and even “patriarchy” are concepts whose usefulness is vitally tied to the theoretical and creative insights of women of color, postcolonial, and Black feminist thinkers. This claim builds upon, even as it departs from, earlier critiques of the term, a troubling of “patriarchy’s” conceptual prevalence exemplified by the work of influential postcolonial and women of color feminists Hazel Carby and Chandra Mohanty. Writing in the 1980s and problematizing the assumptions of second wave and predominantly white, western feminist scholarship, both argue that the concept of patriarchy imagines a system of subordination along binarized gender lines that is imposed cookie-cutter style onto analyses of divergent global contexts. For Mohanty, the concept of “*the* patriarchal family” (61) is one of many ethnocentric constructs discursively productive of a monolithic “third world woman.”² For Carby, the term’s application to the experiences of Black women in Britain

fails to account for the extent to which race, class, and histories of colonial domination contribute to marginalization.

If Perry’s concept avoids such universalizing pitfalls, what then, *is* patriarchy? What does the term allow us to see that others cannot? Seeking to trace “a more detailed architecture of patriarchy than what commonplace understandings in the US offer, something more complex than the binary gender constructs of Western bourgeois domesticity” (5), the first five chapters of *Vexy Thing* tell a long history of patriarchy’s multifaceted workings, ranging from sixteenth-century European colonialism to twenty-first-century neoliberalism. What emerges is a densely reinvigorated term: here, “patriarchy” does not simply describe a social system that coerces humans into violently maintained categories of masculine/feminine but is better understood as a constantly evolving system of racial capitalism that produces subjects as “patriarchs,” as “ladies” and “lieges,” or, most importantly for the concerns of liberation feminism, as “nonpersons.” This structure functions as an analytic for theorizing racialized personhood, for asking who, legally and discursively, has access to it, and emerges from a reading of Enlightenment and early capitalist thought approached through the work of radical Black theorists. For example, building on Hortense

Spillers’s argument that a gender-based analysis cannot account for the “ungendering” of slavery, Perry returns to the writings of John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, and Adam Smith to identify how a theory of personhood-through-patriarchy was formed at the dawn of global capitalism. For Smith, Perry notes, “the primary line of distinction . . . is between civilized and savage, and the secondary one is between men and women” (30). A feminism that does not take into account the position of the nonperson, then, would leave the concept “patriarchy” to its previously retrograde state, only able to describe the relationship between European man, a citizen with rights before the state, and European woman, a contractually bound (through “femme coverture”) figure with partial access to the patriarch’s personhood. Instead, Perry’s aim is “to tell a story of modernity out of those constructed as object” (91): To write a feminist history that centers the nonperson without rights who emerges “directly out of the lacunae of Locke’s ideas” (91) and whose radical potential we must embrace.

The argument “that some are left standing either in the vestibule . . . or in at its borders . . . is written into the idea of the liberal subject” (21), may be familiar to readers of feminist and radical women of color scholarship. Indeed, Perry repeatedly professes

her debt to the work of Sylvia Wynter, Gloria Anzaldúa, Spillers, and Mohanty, among others. To understand *Vexy Thing’s* weighty contribution to this lineage one must consider the argumentative implications of its formal choices. With style and method central to Perry’s vision of feminist praxis, the book departs from the traditional humanities monograph format of one or two case studies per chapter, theorizing instead through a wide range of intentionally brief “stories and historical vignettes” (13). Perry writes with direct, jargon-light, and yet poetic prose, leading the reader through often speculative readings of literary, legal, visual, and virtual objects to reveal patriarchy’s many faces, the astounding range of examples employed to articulate the exclusions of liberal subjecthood evincing the generative portability of Black feminist insights for interdisciplinary analysis.

A capacious vision of patriarchy’s reach requires a conceptual framework elastic enough to gather together a vast number of “vexing” objects. More positions within the structure of patriarchal systems than immutable categories of identity, the figures of patriarch, liege, and nonperson function for Perry as conceptual tools for mapping relations of domination. The work of the feminist scholar is to “read through the layers” (9) of patriarchy’s emergences in any

given location, an exercise producing especially effective results in Perry's analysis of the "failed patriarch" Oscar Wilde. By positioning Wilde's 1895 obscenity trial within a broader context of his understudied fetishization of racialized and subordinated young men in Europe, Algeria, and the US, Perry complicates Wilde's position within queer history. By suggesting that Wilde's exploitation of Algerian boys was thoroughly in line with the domination expected of colonial figures, Perry argues that Wilde was tried not simply because he had sex with men but because he did so with someone of his own racial and class identity. To read Wilde's trial through the rubric of "patriarchy," then, rather than say, "the history of sexuality"—through which the trial is read as exemplifying the formation of modern sexual regimes—is, Perry demonstrates, to consider that the "transgressive" Wilde was criminalized because he flouted the "codes applied to 'persons' under patriarchy" even as he dominated "those who stood outside of personhood" (81). In a moment of particular interest to readers within queer studies, the category of "the person" nuances that of "the homosexual."

As the analysis moves closer to the present, both Perry's implementation of the triad of terms (patriarch, liege, and nonperson) and the style of distinct case studies gives way to a more sustained meditation

on the gendered and racial conditions of neoliberalism. Certain of the previous centuries' juridical effects and distinct subject positions may have lost their rigidity, but in a neopatriarchal system of fewer legal exclusions, the exploitation of the nonperson—here figured, for example, as those prey to the prison industrial complex, or as Southeast Asian sex workers "saved" through neocolonial coercion into sweat shop labor—remains a cornerstone of capitalist success. Contemporary patriarchy, Perry argues, can be found at work in governance feminism's reliance on a model of criminalization and incarceration, in the "entrepreneurial" demand that feminized subjects self-market in the "simulacra" of the virtual, and in the neoliberal language with which even the most Marxist-aligned of academics speak, implicated as they are within the administrative apparatus of the university. An instance of Perry's argumentative form, the chronological structure of *Vexy Thing* demonstrates the necessity of writing feminist histories of the present, its detailed genealogy of twenty-first-century racialized gender allowing us to ask not only, how did we get here, but also, where are we?

If Perry's vision of liberation feminism involves identifying the multifaceted workings of patriarchy, it also requires *disidentifying* with patriarchal logics in order to forge a feminist—and therefore

antiracist—praxis of living. It is this project towards which the final chapters of *Vexy Thing* turn more fully. Might we unlearn the ruses of capitalist competitiveness through imaginative remapping? Perry asks. Here, reading Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, the belly-buttonless character Pilate is shown to exemplify liberation feminism in her rejection of property and her denaturalization of ableist—and therefore patriarchal—ideology. Another chapter proposes the radical potentiality of “passionate utterances” to cut through the discursive surface of the performative, with Perry constructing a politics of “passion” in dialogue with Audre Lorde’s concept of the “erotic.” *Vexy Thing* concludes by avowing the liberationist possibilities of curatorial living. This chapter, “The Vicar of Liberation,” is partly a response to what Perry perceives as the excess of surface-level information disseminated in the virtual world, a simulacrum out of which we must forge nonsurface-level relations. Her argument is most striking, however, not when advocating an ability to choose what we focus on but when foregrounding the necessity of a non-utopian reckoning with the present. Feminist living, Perry argues, is not a practice of selectively excising the difficult from one’s political and intellectual life but a reminder of that age-old feminist mantra: “The personal is political.” As she puts it,

“Liberation is not departure from everything. It is found in the conditions of existence” (232).

Were *Vexy Thing* a novel, reviewers would no doubt name it a modern epic, so broad is its reach across time, space, and discipline. In this monograph that unfurls as history and manifesto combined, Perry is as comfortable parsing the politics of minute biographical details as she is scaling outwards to enrich conceptual terms unruly in their descriptive scope. By hailing the usefulness of “patriarchy,” Perry treads a line between the conceptually portable and the universalizing with which some readers may take issue. As stated in her introduction, Perry seeks to avoid the trap of pointing out “Here’s patriarchy here—and look: It’s also over there!” focusing instead on “the relation between here and there” (6). That *Vexy Thing* has more to say about the effects of patriarchy experienced in a particular “here”—the majority of objects are drawn from US and European contexts—than she does about the usefulness of the term for feminist scholarship addressing specific non-Western sites of inquiry, will be a test of Perry’s concept that responses to the book will determine.

The risks inherent in seeking to texture such chunky terms as “patriarchy” and “gender” notwithstanding, *Vexy Thing* is a groundbreaking work of Black feminist scholarship. Both generously worldbuilding and rigorously deconstructive, it offers a

challenging vision of liberation that will be of value to scholars, students, and activists alike, a vital text for anyone seeking creative, critical, and always personal tools for getting out from under the hold of patriarchy's racial logics. In particular, it presents an at once sobering and energizing mandate for those who would consider themselves as already having done so, Perry's consistent call for readers to grapple with their own complicity a reflection of the book's convincing claim that "Ends cannot sustain a feminist life. Praxis holds more promise" (240).

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NOTES

1. Angie, "The Twenty Best Protest Signs to Dismantle the Patriarchy This Weekend," *women.com*, Jan. 18, 2018, <https://www.women.com/angie/lists/the-best-womens-march-sign-ideas-funniest-most-clever-feminist-nasty-women>
2. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse," in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lordes Torres (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 51–80.