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ENGL 124 #3509

15 July 2019

“Look, I don’t dance now / I make money moves [...] / I’m a boss,
you a worker bitch / I make bloody moves” —Cardi B

“For we have, built into all of us, old blueprints of expectation and
response, old structures of oppression, and these must be altered
at the same time as we alter the living conditions which are a
result of those structures. For the master’s tools will never
dismantle the master’s house.” —Audre Lorde

Beautiful and Cruel: *Hustlers*, Power, and the Blinding Lure of False Consciousness

In Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street*, there is a vignette where the lower class, Latinx protagonist, Esperanza Cordero, makes the realization that beauty equals power in American culture, as she yields, “I am an ugly daughter. I am the one nobody comes for” (88). A young and impressionable girl, she looks to the women in the movies for role models, asserting that “[i]n the movies there is always one with red lips who is beautiful and cruel. She is the one who drives men crazy and laughs them all away. Her power is her own. She will not give it away” (Cisneros 89). Finding herself lacking in the capitol of mainstream feminine beauty, the little girl

decides to claim power in a different way—like the men in her family, the actions she sees them do every day. It is through imitating men and not acting like a woman, especially an unattractive one for whom men will not come, that she sees a way out of her status. She pledges, “I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. I am one who leaves the table *like a man* (emphasis added), without putting back the chair or picking up the plate” (Cisneros 89). In a world where her options are limited, Esperanza seizes a negative, dominant male trait as her way out, or up.

Esperanza’s intersecting struggle can be perceived through different sociological lenses; however, most useful to the discourse at hand is conflict theory, in which one “looks at society as a competition for limited resources.” (Griffiths 18). In this case, the resource is status, and all that it entails. This theory is born out of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels’ *Communist Manifesto* where they point out the “antagonism” between capital and wage-labor, that is “to be a capitalist, is to have not only a purely personal, but a social *status* in production” (24); hence their problem with capitalism is the inequality it produces amongst people—the haves (aka, *winners*) and have-nots. Later, German sociologist, Max Weber, would add to their theory that it is not only economic inequalities that cause conflict, but also inequalities of political power and social structure that are “moderated by social mobility” (Griffiths 18). Eventually, feminists take up conflict theory as gender intersects with political power and social structure. In “Gendered Power and Privilege,” sociologist Janet Saltzman Chafetz, asserts “[the] more male the composition of societal elites, the less access women will have, relative to men, to rewarding productive work in the economy....and the less access the women have to rewarding productive work in the economy, the greater the level of gender stratification” (273). Esperanza finds herself at the intersectionality of class, race, and gender, and sees her only capital in society in

performing like a man who is dominant or a woman who is beautiful and cruel. What one does to gain power in their life can be said to be defined by the circumstances, or stratification of it, and if like Esperanza, one wants to look to popular culture for representation of that struggle, one need look no further than the 2019 film, *Hustlers*.

The film is remarkable for a lot of reasons. First, *Hustlers* is written and directed by a woman, Lorene Scafaria Destiny, and features an all-female, diverse cast of sex workers or dancers, often called strippers. It is “inspired by” a true story, though names have been changed. The plot centers around a young, Asian woman—stripper name, Destiny; real name Dorothy—played by Constance Wu. What *Entertainment Magazine* calls a “Crime Dramedy,” the film is shown in flashbacks as Destiny is interviewed by *New York Magazine* reporter, Elizabeth, played by Julia Stiles. The story follows Destiny through pre- and post- 2008 recession in her field. Before the recession, she struggles as a dancer to support herself and her grandmother until she meets the glamorous, top-tier, money-making stripper, Ramona, played by Oscar-nominated Jennifer Lopez, who ends up coaching Destiny and introducing her to a more elite group of men, her “Wall Street regulars.” Eventually, Destiny makes friends with other dancers, including stellar cameos by Lizzo, as Liz, and Cardi B, as Diamond. Diamond briefly coaches Destiny, most notably telling her to “Drain the clock, not the c*ck,” meaning the longer one dances for a man, in this case, on his lap, the more money she can make. After the recession, the business stalls and Destiny finds it hard to make a living to support her grandmother and new baby. Like Ramona, she is a single mother. Eventually, after the recession, the girls meet up again and start a scam where they get men inebriated and take them to the strip club, where they proceed to run up the man’s credit card, sometimes maxing them up to \$50,000. The women are successful,

but not enough, so they start drugging the men in order to make more money. Ultimately, they are caught, and while none of them serve prison time, they are convicted of felonies.

In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, Lopez asserts that the film is “about greed, power, and the American dream, and what a certain group of women, who worked in a field where they were degraded and discounted, will do to achieve it” (qtd. in Nolfi). This is true, as at one point, the film depicts Destiny, in trying to compete with the new group of Russian strippers, fellating a man for three-hundred dollars, only to discover that he left her three twenty-dollar bills. Not just in this scene, but in others, the degradation of the job is depicted, though it is also fair to say that it is glorified. Still, the women, as Lopez asserts, are willing to do what it takes to get their money, as the life they want is one filled with name brands like Gucci and Louis Vuitton, fur coats, and champagne—all the trappings of the status they think will give them power and control in American Culture, their *American Dream*. If one watches closely, at one point Kim Kardashian is shown on the television in a wonderful slice of intertextuality, as she is the epitome of the status and subsequent power the hustlers desire. In fact, the first words the audience hears in the film are “This is a story about control,” from Janet Jackson’s song of the same title. As the club opens to the viewer, the voiceover/song continues “My control. Control of what I say. Control of what I do. And this is time, I’m gonna do it my way.”

But do these women do it *their* way? No, because the capitalistic system in which they struggle depends upon conflict, so they cannot imagine a better way. While the moral of this story is not clear, nor does it need to be, the message is: if you can’t beat ‘em, join em. Essentially, this is what Destiny and her crew do. They become rhinestone-collar criminals to gain

power over the white-collar criminals. At one point in the film, Ramona breaks down the stratifications of men who come to the strip clubs. She explains:

The guys at the bottom don't do anything dirty to make money, so most of 'em don't have any. But if they do, you can milk 'em for every penny....the guys in the middle will get their hands a little dirty, but they have their limits....CEOs, CFOs, investment bankers, corporate raiders, hedge funders, ax-murderers [the top tier] come straight from the crime scene into the club....and they don't leave till they spent ten thousand, fifteen thousand dollars in one night....They can be degrading. Possessive. Aggressive. Violent. And they never get in any trouble. Because everyone is willing to cover their tracks. Cause deep down they all want what they got. They all want to be on top. Where there are no consequences.

Ramona shares this insight with Destiny to teach her how to navigate and manipulate these men, but the irony is that they seek to be “on top” as well, and they are willing to be “degrading” and “aggressive” in order to do so. Later in the film in a scene where Destiny is being interviewed by the reporter from *New York Magazine*, Destiny seems to feel judged, as she says to the reporter, “What would you do for a thousand dollars? Of course, the answer depends on what you already have.” This illustrates how one's class drives and *limits* their agency, and this is complicated when intersected with race and gender.

Given my understanding of these complexities and my white overprivilege, I feel guilty for being critical of the women in the film. Really guilty. However, even in repeated viewings, I dislike the film, and it comes from my gut as much as my brain. At the same time, I have watched

more films than I can count with all male casts, writers, and directors where bad men did bad things to bad men and morality never came to mind, for example *The Godfather* franchise, *Goodfellas*, and most Quentin Tarantino movies. Perhaps this is because these types of films are part of the dominant culture, going back to *Dirty Harry*, and I have grown up watching them, so I never stopped to critically examine how they support social inequalities. Now, when confronted with women making a film in the same genre, in a similar vein, I want more, at the very least the righteous indignation of *Thelma and Louise*. Furthermore, the women in *Hustlers* have a right to be angry, but I want their anger to amount to more than the crimes of the oppressors. Granted, my aforementioned white privilege puts me in a position to want more out of the film, but to be fair, this film is not a serious examination of the difficult lives of women who dance for a living. As stated earlier, some degradations are shown, but equally, the job is romanticized throughout the film. As the girls become better at ripping off men, the high-end shopping trips get better—ala *Pretty Woman*. When we first meet Ramona, Jennifer Lopez' character, she enters the stage like a goddess and uses the pole to the best of her powers, which are impressive, as we hear Fiona Apple singing, "I've been a bad bad girl / I've been careless with a delicate man." The scene is sensually luscious; it is easy to lose oneself in Lopez's allure, and all sorts of words synonymous with romantic come to mind. Later, before the recession, Usher comes to the club and makes it rain, and Destiny recounts: "And for one last moment, everything was so glamorous and cool."

Ok, but is it wrong for this viewer to want more out this film with a richly diverse, female cast and female writer and director? Feminist author, Audre Lorde, in *Sister Outsider*, examines the intersectionality of class and gender, summoning Paulo Freire's ideas that "the true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but

that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us, and which knows only the oppressor's tactics, the oppressor's relationships" (615). The women of *Hustlers* use the "oppressor's tactics," but ultimately, they fail. As Lorde herself claims, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (615). Ultimately, I want a film where they do not use the dominant male tactics, the master's tools, one where they, as Janet Jackson asserts in the first scene of the film, "do it [their] way," but do they even know what *their way* might look like?

The answer the film provides, sadly, is no. Like Cisneros's Esperanza from *The House on Mango Street*, Destiny and the other women of *Hustlers* could be said to have developed a "false consciousness," which Daniel Little describes as "a concept derived from Marxist theory of social class. The concept refers to the systematic representation of dominant social relations in the consciousness of subordinate classes" (par. 1). They believe that becoming the oppressor is the way in which they can overcome their situation. As Lorde observes, "For in order to survive, those of us for whom oppression is as american as apple pie have always had to be watchers, to become familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection" (609). The women of *Hustlers* "adopt" the negative behavior, but the system is such that they cannot succeed. Here, I am also reminded of bell hooks, who in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* sums up what I am trying to say, quite poignantly:

....women can and do participate in politics of domination, as perpetrators as well as victims—that we dominate, that we are dominated. If focus on patriarchal domination masks this reality or becomes the means by which women deflect

attention from the real conditions and circumstances of our lives, then women cooperate in suppressing and promoting false consciousness, inhibiting our capacity to assume responsibility for transforming ourselves and society. (hooks 616)

And while I am inclined, as I should be, to give hooks the last word, I want to end with the suggestion that when it comes to *Hustlers*, there was a better film to be made, one that could have elevated the ways we think about women, our realities and potential. Yes, a film about sex workers, maybe even a morally ambiguous one, but a more complex film about the authentic lives of women who do this work and the real challenges they face because “not enough feminist work has focused on documenting and sharing ways individuals confront differences constructively and successfully” (hooks 622).

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