

BRANDON O. HENSLEY

10. LIFTING THE DUMBBELLS OF WHITENESS AND HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

Every day, I'm lifting them.
They lift me; I lift them.
It's exhausting work
maintaining the appearance of a hegemonic masculine body and upholding whiteness
while doing so breaks your heart and crushes your critical soul.

The first time I immersed myself in bodybuilding, I thought I had a good reason
to build a muscled "human fortress" (Fussell, 1991, p. 24).¹
I couldn't take getting beat up, taunted, called "Braindead" (instead of Brandon),
called "faggot," "bitch," "queer," and pushed, laughed at, yelled at down the hallway,
(a)shamed.
I know I'm not alone (now).

Feeling bullied in one form or another is a human experience that cuts people
across racial lines and other socially constructed borders of difference.
For me, a path of isolation was the way. Working out alone,
first in my dad's tool room in the basement, then in an old hospital gym
and, later, in high-tech university gyms where weights gleamed and mirrors were
everywhere.

Luckily, in college I had teachers who cared,
who nurtured me, who talked me into graduate school and college teaching.
If I had not taken the route of graduate studies, critical/cultural studies, and
autoethnography,
I might be a junior account executive for Fleishman Hillard, or some other corporation
of conspicuous consumer casino capitalist spin.

With no critical consciousness,
a life of woeful unchecked whiteness atrophies
the muscles of the heart
and the attendant abilities of empathy, openness, and love.
Lifting The Dumbbells² without thinking, without questioning is the hardening of
the soul; the resulting muscles choke out the capacity for compassion.

B. O. HENSLEY

I have learned to stop lifting them, to question why I am in the first place, to break the culture(s) of domination (hooks, 2003)—even if for fleeting glimmers—but the dumbbells of hegemonic masculinity and whiteness are alluring, always there, menacing, and just when I think I am done with them I do/say/think something and I'm lifting again.

It's exhausting work when lifting these weights break the ability to live and love.

This “reflexercise” (Hensley, 2011) will never be over, unhooking never complete (Hayes & Hartlep, 2013).

I can only work at undoing each lift with a stretch away from whiteness, a critical look into the mirrors of memory and the mind, feeling the burn of assumptions, positionality, complicity, values that still work to reify/deify

the gulag of whiteness and the tyranny of heteronormativity, weights that crush together, but

can maybe also crash together. I hope that I can stand up to future bullies that may or may not be actual people, but certainly will be throwing their weight around in dangerous ignorance and dominance, qualities of a bully behaving in ways steeped in whiteness and hegemonic masculinity.

I picture a day when the dumbbells drop, the hard thud of iron meeting white cracked concrete,

fracturing shattering relief of revelation and weight... (long) wait... lifted.

I hope for a day when social justice and love replace those rusted, bloody weights. A day when white men's “equipment for living”³ is less about greed, gunpowder, pillaging and patrolling, and more about sharing, learning, questioning, unhooking, and co-creating a revolution of love.⁴

NOTES

- ¹ My experiences being bullied in middle school and high school were lived struggles I suppressed until I first wrote about it in graduate school, when auto-ethnography found me.
- ² I capitalize these words to signify two interlocking forces of domination—whiteness and hegemonic masculinity.
- ³ I'm drawing from Kenneth Burke (1931) here, who wrote of identification and the constitutive power of rhetoric.
- ⁴ hooks (2013) writes, “Unless we make a conscious effort to change thought and action by honestly naming all the myriad ways white supremacy impinges on daily life then we cannot shift from a politics of hate and create a new foundation based on a revolution of love” (p. 12).

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