



How Researchers Changed the World Episode 7

Siobhan Brooks - Same sex relationships and the symbolic meaning of marriage in the black community

SB: Gay marriage gives us a language that we haven't had previously to really talk about our relationships in a way that straight people understand the language too. So it's not perfect, but, you know, now in a work setting I can say, 'Oh yes, my spouse, my wife.' And people understand what that means, right?

In black settings you can now bring your spouse to the family barbeque and instead of people saying, 'Oh, is that your friend?', you can say 'Actually no, this is my spouse.' So, it was a way for black queer women to be seen by other black people in these settings

KR: That was Siobhan Brooks, sociologist and Tenure Professor in African American Studies at California State University Fullerton. Siobhan is particularly well known for her work on African-American sex workers. Much of her research has focused on the intersection of racial identity, gender, and sexuality, which is what we'll be discussing with her today, specifically intersections between same-sex marriage and women of colour.

[How Researchers Changed the World introductory music]

KR: Welcome to How Researchers Changed the World: a podcast series supported by Taylor & Francis, which will demonstrate the real-world relevance, value and impact of academic research; and highlight the people and stories behind the research.

My name is Dr. Kaitlyn Regehr. I'm an academic researcher; an author and a scholar of digital and modern culture and I'm interested in how new technologies can broaden the reach and real-world impact of academic research.

In today's episode, we're speaking with Siobhan Brooks and exploring her research into marriage and same-sex relationships amongst African-Americans. Specifically, we'll be unpacking her 2017 paper: 'Black on Black Love: Black Lesbian and Bisexual Women, Marriage, and Symbolic Meaning'.

But before we do that, let's start at the beginning of her journey, with why she decided to pursue a career in research in the first place. Siobhan's entry into becoming a researcher was, as she puts it herself: "very unconventional". She was inspired to pursue a career as a sociologist because of her time at The Lusty Lady Club. She worked there during her undergraduate degree at San Francisco State University, as a way to pay her fees.

SB: I was an exotic dancer at a time where it wasn't common, it wasn't popular for women to do that. But I got introduced into this, ironically enough, through my feminist studies classes. And it was a way that a lot of us felt we could supplement our financial aid."

KR: When Siobhan started working at The Lusty Lady she was told she was not allowed to work in the club's private rooms, where the dancers made the majority of their money. This, she was told, was because white men



wouldn't pay to see black women dance. She was shocked that, even in the exotic dance industry, there was such a huge gap between what white and black dancers could earn – it was this which sparked her desire to become a researcher, and confront this disparity head on.

SB: People can see nude dancers on the stage, but we also had at the time, what was called, like a private pleasures booth, or some people would call it like a VIP room today. And that is usually where women would usually make most of their money.

The club had a policy that was unwritten but spoken that black dancers were not allowed to work in that part of the club because...basically the argument was that white men wouldn't pay to see them because on the stage you could just pay maybe at the time, a quarter, but this started at \$5.00, this private pleasures VIP component. You at least had to put \$5.00 in, you know, for a certain number of minutes. You know, it was window separated by glass, all of that. So, that really started, at least on my end, my activism. And I wrote a petition and then other women started noticing other problems at the club. And so, together we decided to unionise and then the owners of course made concessions. Suddenly there was an array of diverse dancers in that part of the club.

But that I think was what really prompted me to go into sociology actually, when I was finally in grad school and really look at racial stratification within the exotic dance industry. Because I think most people aren't aware that wage disparity would go on every level of occupations, including exotic dancing. I think most people think that this is an area where you make money and that there are no barriers to you making money. But it's actually very similar to what we hear women of colour experience in acting, you know, Hollywood. A very similar type of discrimination.

KR: At that time, The Lusty Lady was one of the most progressive strip clubs, which operated as a workers co-op. It was managed by women, there was no customer contact, and it was considered to be a safe environment – with women escorted to their cars by support staff and a no-tolerance policy towards customers who were disrespectful or abusive to dancers.

But for Siobhan, the way that the club engaged with its workers of colour was a huge flaw in its identity as a feminist establishment. The management were deliberately limiting opportunities of their black dancers to engage with customers, making it more difficult for them to gain customers and earn a fair living. Siobhan thought this was deeply unjust, and she wanted to do something about it. She began to share her story as a way to educate others about disparities in wages between races...

SB: I started to educate, starting at San Francisco State and other colleges in the Bay area, about wage disparity and racism, in the exotic dance industry.

And then when I was doing this, I was asked to publish in an anthology at the time. The title was called 'Whores and Other Feminists' actually published by Routledge and Jill Nagel at the time, was the Editor. When I was doing a book reading from my chapter, I came across an Anthropologist at Modern Times bookstore in San Francisco. Her name is France Winddance Twine. She teaches at UC, Santa Barbara. And she heard my story and she said, "You know, I'd really like to basically mentor you. You should apply to grad school."

And so that really started the ball rolling from a very unconventional way of sort of entering academia. I didn't have any intention of going to Grad school at the time. I was 27. But I realised I really liked learning. I liked lecturing which is what I was doing when I was doing these tours at different colleges, to talk about what we were doing at the Lusty Lady. And I felt that it was time for me to go back. That's a sort of round the way answer



of how I became a researcher.

KR: Since then, Siobhan's research has become more centred around the intersections between African American Studies, Women's Studies, and Gender Studies. She found that reading for her African American Studies classes was primarily focused on black men, whereas reading for her Women's Studies classes was almost entirely about white women. Siobhan felt that no one was talking about or looking at race through the lens of gender and sexuality.

SB: My research projects are looking at how sexuality specifically informs race, right, and our experiences of race. And so working at the Lusty Lady sort of coincided with what I was learning in my Feminist Studies classes. Ironically, we didn't read Bell Hooks in either Black Studies or Women's Studies. I think I stumbled upon her completely by accident. I was doing a research project on black slave women and their position in slave society at the time. I knew about Angela Davis and her work on that, but I came across Bell Hooks and I was like, wow, I've never heard of her before, you know....

KR: For those of you who don't know, Bell Hooks is an American author, professor, feminist and social activist. She has written extensively on the intersectionality of race, capitalism, and gender. Her first major work, 'Ain't I A Woman?' was published in 1981. It's widely recognised as being an influential contribution to feminist thought, looking at omissions of black women within traditional feminist writings. And she's been a major inspiration for Siobhan.

SB: I think a lot of these early experiences really framed the way in which I studied race. I would describe myself as sort of a non-conventional scholar in that sense, when it comes to race.

Now there are more people, I think, who are taking this approach. We have Queer Studies within African American Studies departments more and more. We have scholars that are taking that approach more and more. A lot of queer black scholars specifically, black feminist scholars, who are doing a gender sexuality-based approach in looking at race. Which is different than just looking at race from like the labour market, right. Or race solely vis-à-vis say white supremacy. All these things are of course there in my work but now it's really exciting because I think, and this leads up to the article I did, 'Black on Black Love' I think this is an exciting time for interdisciplinary scholars such as myself.

Now sexuality is really, I don't want to say a hot topic but, it is within Ethnic Studies and it wasn't always. It definitely wasn't always.

KR: As you can probably tell, Siobhan is passionate about working in the gaps of existing scholarship. She began exploring the relationship between gender, sexuality, and race before it was on the research agenda in any substantive way. Her 2017 paper 'Black on Black Love: Black Lesbian and Bisexual Women, Marriage, and Symbolic Meaning' is no exception to this.

Siobhan had become interested in discussions about gay marriage, and particularly what black women had to say on the topic. She felt they weren't being included in the wider academic conversation, and that they had a perspective and view that would be incredibly interesting to explore.



SB: With the gay marriage debate, you had these camps, one camp was framed largely by white middle class gay and lesbian people who were very much for gay marriage and full citizenship, benefits and such. Then you had another camp that was made up of critical white and black queer people that were very critical of gay marriage and felt that it was a way to assimilate. It was a way to further resource divides with queer people of colour and white queers. It wasn't trans-inclusive per se.

There was a lot of critic about basically, why would queer people want to be in an institution that supports patriarchy and ownership of land and all of these things. I knew from my own experience that gay marriage also meant something very different for some of us. And so what I wanted to do was ask, at the heart of the time of when gay marriage was just passed, what did this mean?

And so I went to Los Angeles and I went to a couple of black lesbians meet up groups to meet people. I met about 12, maybe about 12 or 13 women there who wanted to be interviewed.

KR: Join us after this short break, to find out what Siobhan discovered during her interviews.

[Advertising break: intro music]

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[Advertising break: outro music]

KR: Before the break Siobhan was about to tell us about the interviews she conducted for her 2017 research paper 'Black on Black Love'.

Siobhan ended up interviewing nine black lesbians and one black bisexual woman, from the Los Angeles area. Quickly, she began to see a common thread in their answers. Most of the women she interviewed discussed the importance of dating somebody black, of remaining within their community and being committed to engaging with black politics.

SB: I remember one woman, actually I think she was from Santa Barbara or had lived in Santa Barbara, saying that the models that she grew up with her father, the type of black women he dated weren't necessarily positive. In her development she kind of came away with this notion that to move up in society, to assimilate, you should be with a white woman type thing. I think for some of the women I interviewed, that was a theme. And the conscious choice of choosing a partner that's black, and also marrying, kind of symbolises political commitment to blackness, in black spaces.

And I also think that, on top of being queer, if you have inter-racial relationship, that's going to be read very



differently in some of these family settings, than maybe if you're with another black person. People may not understand the relationship but at least the race piece is something that's understood. That was definitely a theme and that stood out to me.

Another theme from some of the women who are religious was really wanting to show up at their church as who they really are. One woman talked about the challenges of trying to find a black church that would be accepting and all of this. Ultimately, I think she found one. But it was really around religion, family but also political commitment to blackness, to black politics. This isn't to say that are not in relationships with black people don't have that commitment as well, but I think when it's a black woman and another black woman, it just makes that legitimacy in the larger community, a little bit easier to have.

Those were some patterns that I had noticed in my interviews. A strong desire to participate and continue a legacy of black political engagement that most black queer people, when we look at our history, have been erased from. I teach in African American Studies Department and most people have no idea who Bayard Rustin was. Everybody knows who Dr King was, but they don't know that his mentor was a black gay man who organised the march on Washington. So that was part of the theme of really wanting to be in that tradition, right, that tradition of black political engagement with community issues.

KR: African American lesbian relationships can be seen as a demonstration of a commitment to the black community. It becomes almost a symbol of racial pride. One of the interviewees, for instance, told Siobhan:

"I was raised by strong Black women. My grandmother was a nurse, at a time when not many women were. My mother was a teen when she had me, but I saw her working to support us. I see dating Black women as an extension of strong Black women."

At the same time, the women Siobhan interviewed also saw marriage as a way of gaining recognition for their relationship and publicising their love for one another. In this instance, marriage demonstrates that a couple is in a committed and stable relationship, meaning that it can be perceived as more legitimate to family and friends within the community.

Another interviewee, for instance, spoke of how her family began to take her relationship 'seriously' only after she married her partner:

"When Donna and I got married, my family—while not totally supportive of my choices—at least took my relationship seriously. They were forced to. I think marriage also forces lesbian couples to take their relationships seriously."

Siobhan tells us that in African American communities there's often a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy when it came to homosexuality. Even if you know that someone in your family or community is gay, you would never say it in public situations – but marriage changes that.

SB: For a lot of us, it was a way to be seen by the larger black community, and that was something understudied. So what I found in that paper that I wrote, was a lot of what gay marriage was for some black lesbian and bisexual women, was a way to have racial subjectivity and cultural legitimacy in black heterosexual settings. So, basically it was a way for them to be out.

Before gay marriage, a lot of queer couples, we always don't really know what the language is to describe ourselves. Often times people say, 'Oh, is your friend coming?'. That was, for years, particularly in black communities, what would be said. Even if you knew someone was gay and you knew this was their partner, often times would not refer to this individual as somebody's partner or lover, let alone spouse. It would be, 'Oh, is your



friend coming?'. Right? It's a way for queer black women to be seen. And so gay marriage gives us a language that we haven't had previously to really talk about our relationships in a way that straight people understand the language too. So it's not perfect, but now in a work setting I can say 'my spouse' and people understand what that means.

KR: The wider importance of Siobhan's research lies in its political significance, and how we can write policy and create institutions that are inclusive, and take into account the experience of women of colour.

SB: I think it's important on a number of levels. I think in terms of just society, it's important when we're looking at families and when we're looking at policy, to really look at what are issues that are important to black queer women specifically? How are those issues different than mainstream gay and lesbian political organising? I think particularly with things like marriage. Statistics show that overall black people have not economically benefitted from marriage. A lot of black heterosexual families are not heteronormative. You have a lot of black single mother parenting in our communities and so it shifts the framework. So it turns into what's needed in terms of resources for black families, which includes queer black family formations.

And then so, I think in the larger society it's around policy. Then I think in terms of individual and racial groups significance, it's also around how have black queer people contributed to black societies and black communities? How is the structure of black life and black families changing? Or are they changing? Is it just that we're seeing more visibility of these groups? I think that's important when we're looking at subjectivity, as I said earlier, black queer people feeling included in black communities, I think all of that is important in terms of when we're looking at our political structures. How can we be more inclusive, even within our black communities? Our black colleges are just now having discussions, which are great, around queer black students at some of these black colleges, particularly black trans women at Spelman College, a historical black liberal arts women's college. That's great because it's not just that it's the largest society and they have to look at these issues, but it's also our resources and also how in black communities, how can we make our institutions that are for black people, more inclusive as well?

KR: And Siobhan believes that some of this change is beginning to take shape. Film and television is one area that she finds promising, in terms of its new representations of diversity.

SB: I think in terms of society; I think the media is interesting. We see the outcome of some of these social movements in media representation, and even though those media representations aren't perfect, they indicate a desire where the society wants to go on some level. There's more diversity in television than what I was growing up with, particularly around black queer images. Moonlight was a wonderful film, Pose is great. That definitely didn't exist when I was coming up, so I think that, that is important in terms of representation.

KR: But, that is by no means to say that her work in this area is done...

SB: Then again, we have a lot of work to do because while you have media representation, you still have a gap of the people that are supposedly represented in the media being extremely disenfranchised. So while we have gay marriage and racial diversity and films more and television, you have a huge rate of LGBT young people,



people of colour, committing suicide in schools.

KR: Research has found that suicide and attempted suicide rates are significantly higher for both African American and LGBT children.

A 2011 study published in the American Journal of Public Health studied lesbian, gay, and bisexual people under the age of 24 – the age by which most suicide attempts occur in the LGBT community. The research found that 19.5% of black respondents had attempted suicide, compared to the 9.1% of white respondents.

SB: I think there's still a lot of work to do with reforming K-12 education. I think university is where we've seen a lot of the social movements get institutionalised in an educational setting, but we haven't really seen that from K through 12 and I think that's really what we need to see. Because not everybody goes to college, you shouldn't have to wait to go to college before you start learning about yourself, you know what I mean? Particularly when we look at suicides, some people won't live long enough to go to college. I think that's still a lot of work that needs to be done and definitely academics can be part of that.

KR: When it comes to the role of academics in changing this situation, Siobhan feels that the focus should be on bringing discussions of race and gender into mainstream schooling, instead of keeping it on the outskirts.

Specifically, she feels that subjects such as African American Studies and Gender Studies shouldn't be separated areas of education or something that you only discover when at university. Instead, these conversations should be interwoven amongst all levels of schooling and the whole education system.

SB: I think definitely Queer Studies, all the interdisciplinary departments and programmes, Ethnic Studies, Women's Studies needs to be supported by universities. I think in addition to that a lot of these issues need to be in mainstream departments: Sociology, Biology, Geography, Anthropology. I think just really diversifying these courses, these subject matters, throughout different disciplines in one way to get the research out there, at least within university settings. Because you're right, it is in academia but even if we look at where it is in academia, it's not everywhere.

Most of our classes for instance, fall in GE. Students have to take General Education requirements to graduate and that's where they stumble upon Ethnic Studies, Queer Studies, Women's Studies and so forth. If you don't take those GE classes, then you can pretty much go in your college career not learning about these things. I think that's still a struggle. Is how to not have these disciplines and these particular research topics marginalised even within academia.

KR: It is through making these areas of research more prominent and more accessible throughout education that will be the way forward. And that's exactly what Siobhan's own research has done, and will continue to do. In the case of this research paper, it's about bringing the perspective of women of colour into the wider conversation of gay marriage, to acknowledge and understand the full picture. In a broader sense her research sits at the intersection of issues and academic disciplines, and brings together ideas and individuals to fill those 'gaps' of knowledge. For Siobhan, this is the beauty of the research.



SB: I think research can change the world, by opening up possibilities and connecting people.

KR: To find out more about this podcast and today's topic, visit howresearchers.com/blacklove. We'd also love to hear your feedback on today's episode. You can leave us a review on your podcast provider, or send us your thoughts on social media – tag us on @howresearchers and use hashtag #howresearchers.

In the next episode we'll be speaking to researcher Marco te Brommelstroet about active travel, and the way types of transport impact the way we relate to other people, and to the environment around us.

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This podcast was written and produced by Monchü and recorded at Under the Apple Tree Studios. Our producers were Ryan Howe and Tabitha Whiting with editing, mixing and mastering by Miles Myerscough-Harris at WBBC.

We would like to acknowledge the incredible support of Taylor & Francis Group with a special thank you to Elaine Devine and Claire Dodd. I'm Dr Kaitlyn Regehr. Join us next time for How Researchers Change the World. Thanks for listening.