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Don't Explain: Lesbianism Invisibility

In Jewelle Gomez's story, *Don't Explain*, we meet a black lesbian woman named Letty. She is a hardworking woman at a cafe who doesn't have many friends and is obsessed with Billie Holiday. In *Don't Explain* Gomez makes it very apparent that Letty doesn't show off that she is lesbian and is ashamed of being lesbian in this community. The only time she shows that she is lesbian is in private or in her own thoughts. Letty is a victim of Lesbian Invisibility, and in this story she does not get a happy ending in which she gets out from under the cloak of invisibility in front of her friends. Letty is a lesbian experiencing invisibility in her community because of societal norms that have been pushed upon her and the rest of society since birth and this is important because it shapes her life and the way she interacts with everyone involved.

"When she'd quit working at Salmagundi's and come to the 411 she'd promised herself never to think about any woman like that again" (Gomez). This is just one example of where Letty shows how deep in the closet she is. She shows us that she is not ready to accept her true feelings about women and it's because of her society at the time. She is not allowed to be who she wants to be. She is first and foremost a black woman in the late 1950's, in which the society is not accepting of her skin color. Then she has the added on stress of being lesbian which was also not okay in the 1950's so she has hidden her identity deep inside of herself and doesn't make a scene. Obviously later in the story she meets the group of friends of Delia's and she feels more comfortable around them, but she still does not reveal that she is lesbian. Even in the company of peers she still feels uncomfortable with the fact that she is lesbian and will not let them know about that part of her.

"Lesbian feminist Jewelle Gomez describes this invisibility as an "epidemic" in "Black/ African studies, women's studies, literature and sociology" (Clay). In *Don't Explain* the invisibility as an epidemic is noticeable. We see Letty denying what she feels in order to just get through the day and being invisible to the lesbian community. She doesn't even consider showing that she is lesbian or trying to find friends who are like her because she knows that many lesbians will not come out because of the invisibility epidemic. The fact that she never actually even comes out to the reader shows that even in her private thoughts she doesn't think about it. She wants to appear as if she is normal. She even denies herself her own pleasure, "Letty slid her hand along the soft nylon of her gown to rest it between her full thighs. She pressed firmly, as if holding desire inside herself" in order to get the thoughts of being lesbian out of her head. Even though she is a lesbian she is trying so hard to deny it to the world and herself that she is lesbian. This is important because we can see that Letty has the desire to make herself happy and content, but because of the societal constrictions on being lesbian or gay she doesn't let that happen.

"I think it's even more dangerous for people of colour to embrace homophobia than it is for whites to embrace racism, simply because we're embattled psychologically and economically as an ethnic group. We leave ourselves in a very weakened position if we allow the system to pit us against each other. I also think it renders Black people politically smug. That's the thing about homophobia, racism, anti-Semitism, any of the 'ism' - once you embrace those you tend to be kind of smug" (Gomez, Smith). This is an example what is affecting Letty on a daily basis. Letty is psychologically and economically imprisoned in her position. She sees that she cannot reveal that she is lesbian and in the economic situation where if it were to come out that she was lesbian, she would probably lose her job. She is already not on good terms from just being black, because of what Aristotle does when he walks into the building, "Aristotle's glance skimmed his dimly lit domain before he made his way to his stool, the only one with a back. That was Letty's signal. No matter that it was her break: she knew white people didn't like to see their employees sitting down, especially with their shoes off" and being black is something she was born as and it's visible. She is trying to hide the one thing she can hide from society so at least in that aspect she is accepted into groups. With being in some of the "-ism" groups she finds herself backed into a corner with no escape because she is so harshly judged than the norm of being a straight white male in the 1950s. The system is trying so hard to make the black and the white people against each other which makes Letty feel uncomfortable. Also having the straight and LGBT groups against each other as well makes Letty feel like she is the bottom of the barrel in society.

"But there is also a sense of real choice because they've made a conscious decision to be out and have children. They are not long suffering victims. They are not women who have been abandoned by their men. They are lesbian mothers who have made a place in the world that is not a victims place. Now that doesn't necessarily mean that things are any easier or simpler for them. For instance they haven't inherited any money. But there is a psychological difference because most Black lesbian mothers have made a choice and have a community they can look to for support" (Gomez, Smith). These Black lesbians have to give up so much in their lives. They have so many obstacles against them in their daily lives, such as possibly not being able to provide for their children, and having the scrutiny of their family and friends bearing down on them every day of their lives. If they want to be in a normal part of society it is necessary to hide part of their identity and hiding the fact that they're lesbian is much easier to hide than being black. Also being a mother on top of that would probably confuse the children and the people in their life that have known them before they reveal that they are lesbian. If they don't reveal this, it might make their relationship with their family and children strained since they are not showing their whole self to the people they trust and know the best. It's important to include all kinds of black lesbians because it gives us a wide range of perspective to show us what Letty is going through. Yes she's not a mother, but having the struggles of other kinds of black lesbians plays a part in her life too.

"I knew I was a lesbian too. But likewise I saw no way to act on it and stay on the path. This was a path that I had not necessarily chosen for myself, but that my family had worked very hard to give me the option of choosing. I'd think, 'How the hell can I excel in school, go to college, graduate school... And then become lowlife by sleeping with women. I mean it just didn't jibe. Some people think that when I came out during the women movement it was an easy thing. But I'd just like to say right here for the record, that from puberty on, I had screaming nightmares because I was having dreams of being sexual with women" (Gomez, Smith). Lesbian women do not have the right outlets to help them come to grips with their true identity. They have a hard time with making sure they are comfortable with coming out to the people they trust the most because it is such a taboo topic. Especially with Letty, she does not have the support system that a lot of lesbians do now. Lesbians now have so many more opportunities and outlets to make sure that they feel included and safe in their communities. They are able to go to groups that fit their needs, they are able to find women that are exactly like them and express their struggles openly and not get ostracized for being who they are. It's not that it isn't hard for lesbians now to come out to people, but it is much easier than for women in Letty's time to come out. As Smith says she had a lot of issues with being able to come out and had nightmares about it, but at least she was able to come out and be accepted by some people. Whereas Letty would probably be disowned by her family and her friends would not accept her for whom she is.

Lesbianism Invisibility is very prominent in *Don't Explain*. Letty shows this often and makes us think about what her situation was in this time period. There are a lot of different kinds of lesbians, and using different kinds to analyze Letty's actions helps us understand her actions even more. Letty is a lesbian experiencing invisibility in her community because of societal norms that have been pushed upon her and the rest of society since birth. In the words of Billie Holiday, "Hush now, don't explain", Letty makes this her anthem and words to live by until the day she dies.

Works Cited

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