HOOKING UP WHILE BEING 'DOWN' (WITH THE CAUSE):

A STUDY OF BLACK SEXUAL LIFE AT A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE
UNIVERSITY

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A Dissertation

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The Faculty of the Graduate School

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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By

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Dr. Joan Hermsen, Dissertation Supervisor

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School,

have examined the Dissertation entitled

HOOKING UP WHILE BEING 'DOWN' (WITH THE CAUSE): A STUDY OF

BLACK SEXUAL LIFE AT A PREDOMINANTLY WHTIE UNIVERSITY

Presented by Jennifer J. Casper

A candidate for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

And hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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Professor Joan Hermsen

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Professor Rebecca Scott

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Professor Keona Ervin

# DEDICATION

To Ma and Dad, your unconditional support knows no bounds. I love you
dearly; you're both my favorite.

To the ancestors for guiding me.

And to Xavier and Austin, this one's for you.

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A STUDY OF BLACK SEXUAL LIFE AT A PREDOMINANTLY WHITE
UNIVERSITY

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation centers Black collegiate women's intersectional experiences of

navigating dating and hookup culture at a large historically predominantly white

university in the Midwest. Using a qualitative approach, I found that the structural

politics of space, race, gender, sexuality, and class affect how Black students navigate

racially segregated campus social life, which informs dating and hooking up strategies.

This belies extant studies that continue to privilege middle-class white students'

perspectives and maintain that students of color are less likely to engage in hooking up

practices.

I argue that the predominantly white university operates as a white spatial

imaginary in which white students create racial boundaries around the dominant social

and hookup culture on campus through racially exclusive behaviors, intensifying Black

women's aversion to interracial coupling. In response, Black students establish a Black

spatial imaginary grounded in racial solidarity and support through the creation of an

informal social system with separate cultural spaces. Within these spaces, engagement

with Black-oriented social media becomes a preeminent mechanism through which Black

students initiate romantic or sexual interest. Contemporary politics of Black sexuality aid

in the facilitation of a complex Black heteropatriarchal structure that shapes how students

date and hook up according to the intersections of their racial authenticity, gender

conformity, class status, and sexual orientation.

# INTRODUCTION: THE PROSPECT OF BLACK COLLEGIATE HOOKUP CULTURE

## <u>Introduction</u>

My current dissertation research was inspired by the topic I chose for my second-year paper in the fall of 2016. I was initially interested in the dating experiences of Black collegiate women at predominantly white institutions. My data collection consisted of in-depth interviews with heterosexual and non-heterosexual Black undergraduate women[1] about their encounters with dating at a large public predominantly white institution[2] in the Midwest that I will refer to using the pseudonym Jefferson State University[3]. I was particularly interested in how their social location as college-age Black women in a white dominated space impacted their experiences with dating, and as an extension, campus social life. When asked what dating was like on campus, the customary response was, "there is no dating". Conversations eventually led to their perception that traditional dating, where two individuals actively get to know each other to decide if they want to pursue a relationship (Bailey 1989), was being taken over by 'hooking up', casual sexual encounters that can range from kissing to sexual intercourse (Bogle 2007; Glenn and Marquardt 2001). This was rather unexpected, not only because of the historical role of respectability politics in the Black community[4] that promotes chaste and moral values regarding sexuality (Higginbotham 1994), but also because of the notion by scholars that Black students and other racial minorities are less likely to engage in hooking up

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[1] These interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

[2] Also referred to as 'PWI'.

[3] This pseudonym will also be referred to by the abbreviation 'JSU'.

[4] This is significant along the lines of class, where the Black middle-class have used this idea to gain upward social mobility (Frazier 1957), contributing to the perception of a Black deviant sexuality being more so attributed to lower- and working-class individuals (Hill Collins 2004).

practices or participate in campus social life (Wade 2017; Bogle 2008; Freitas 2013). I was intrigued; I *had* to learn more about this culture the women were describing. I was able to get a peek into their social world at a Black homecoming event I attended in the same fall of 2016. I was met with conflicting representations of Blackness-on one hand, it was an unapologetic celebration of Black student culture that was visibly and intentionally disruptive of white space through the demand of their own; on the other, it was a demonstration of power and status based on gender, class, and heterosexual privileges. To better understand the dynamics going on between and amongst these students, I decided to not only consider Black women's viewpoints and experiences, but Black men's as well[5]. So, while I went into this research with the intent to explore Black students' experiences with college dating, I discovered along the way that they hook up too; they just approach it ways that are dissimilar from portrayals of their white counterparts.

According to a study done in 2013 on Facebook users, college campuses remain opportune places for conventional dating and romantic partnership, with about 28% of users having met their partner in college (Newlon 2013)[6]. This number is likely to be even higher today, considering the surge in online dating in recent years; a study done in 2019 by The Knot (Lee 2019), a wedding planning website, found that 22% of spouses have now met online. It appears that even with changes in *how* people date, they are still finding ways to connect and commit. These studies, however, aren't categorized by differences in race, gender, or sexual orientation, so it's difficult to ascertain whether

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[5] For the purposes of this research, I will be operating within the cisgender binary of 'men' and 'women', while also acknowledging that room needs to be made within studies on dating and hookup culture to attend to the experiences of transgender folks specifically.
[6] While somewhat dated, this is the largest study on collegiate dating and relationships that I could locate.

these percentages include college age Black students, either heterosexual or non-heterosexual. When looking specifically at the Black population in the context of the United States, Morris (2014) reports that 89% of Black men and 76% of Black women believe that good romantic relationships are important, in addition to 74% and 67% of both, respectfully, viewing marriage as a positive phenomenon. However only 27% of Black women and 33% of Black men are married, as compared to 54% of white women and 56% of white men. This disparity would seem to indicate that Black people aren't as invested in committed relationships, although this clearly can't be further from the truth; then what could be the cause? Although difficult to pinpoint, the likely distinctive effects of changing attitudes towards dating, sex, and commitment on Black relationships may be responsible. Current social perceptions of college dating life appear to view hooking up as the new social norm (Bogle 2007), which is shared by students as illustrated above by the Black women I interviewed. Wade (2017), one of the leading scholars on this topic, argues that an element of what keeps hookup culture functioning is the *belief* that everyone else is hooking up. In reality, students are dating *and* hooking up at very similar rates; by their senior year, approximately 62% of students have hooked up, but 61% of students have also gone on at least one date (Kuperberg and Padgett 2015). Therefore, while my primary focus is hookup culture, I also consider the role of dating and relationships as they pertain to the different processes involved in the formation and organization of hookup culture.

My dissertation research is a qualitative study of how heterosexual and non-heterosexual Black undergraduate women and men construct and discern their sexual and racial identities through navigating dating and hookup culture in college. More

specifically, I fixate on the experiences of Black students at a historically predominantly white institution in the Midwest to better examine the impact of racialized environments on behavior. By focusing on the way that black sexual politics (Hill Collins 2004) affects and informs students' behaviors by using a critical race feminist methodology (Onwuachi-Willig 2006) to address the relationship between structure and identity, I hope to better understand how hookup culture is impacted by the intersections of space, race, gender, class, and sexuality. With these considerations in mind, my study aims to explore the following research questions: **(1)** How is collegiate hookup culture shaped by the intersections of space, race, gender, sexuality, and class? **(2)** How can we look at the racial politics of collegiate space to better understand the structural elements within hookup culture? **(3)** How do racial experiences with white student populations inform Black students' understanding of gender and sexuality? **(4)** How has technology and social media affected the development of hookup culture, and how is it used by Black college students? **(5)** What role does the concept of Black sexual politics play in how heterosexual and non-heterosexual Black men and women navigate campus social life, dating, and hookup culture? **(6)** And lastly, how does this navigation influence current understandings of Black sexual identity in its relation to Black gender ideology?

## Methodology

My research study utilizes an intersectional critical race feminist (CRF) approach to qualitative interviewing and participant observation wherein I employed methods through data collection that have allowed me to identify and analyze the relationship between structure and inequality as they relate specifically to race, gender, class, and sexuality (Onwuachi-Willig 2006). 'CRiT walking', a performative methodology within

the domain of critical race theory (Delgado and Stefancic 2017), enables researchers to recognize the relationship between racism and other interconnected systems of power as they maneuver higher education (Giles and Hughes 2009). This approach emphasizes the critique of "structural inequities deeply embedded within the academy" as researchers metaphorically 'walk' through academic spaces, which I've extended to include inequities of sexism, heterosexism, and sexualism in addition to racism. This methodology allows me to situate the university as an authoritative domain that constructs and reinforces intersecting systems of power which directly inform how students navigate dating and hooking up. My qualitative data includes twenty-five semi-structured, in-depth interviews[7] with heterosexual and non-heterosexual Black undergraduate women and men[8] between the years of 2016 and 2022. In addition, I conducted approximately ten hours of participant observation, which involves a researcher observing and studying the activities of a specific group (Maxwell 2013), at several physical[9] and virtual events that took place on and off campus. These qualitative methods allow me to both examine how students' narratives reflect the ways in which they construct meanings around their experiences and personally observe the racialized, gendered, and sexualized student interaction that they describe. This approach has allowed me to gather extensive data on the politics involved in Black college social life, dating, and hookup culture, which the following chapters will examine through thematic analysis.

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[7] These interview questions can be located in Appendix A.
[8] Participant demographic data can be found in Appendix B.
[9] Observation at these events occurred before the COVID-19 pandemic.

My identity as a Black, cisgender, heterosexual, educated, middle-class, radical feminist womyn[10] has directly impacted my research process. Qualitative feminist methodologies tend to reject positivist approaches to research and instead emphasize and embrace the importance of reflexivity in researchers' procedures for data collection (England 1994). This approach allows researchers to be self-analytical about their relationship to their subject of study and how it can affect processes of obtaining and analyzing data. My access to certain narratives and spaces is made more possible due to my identity as a both a Black womyn and a fellow Black student in higher education. I believe that utilizing reflexivity in my methodological approach has allowed me greater possibilities in engaging with my site, participants, and data.

*Data Collection*

In total, I interviewed twenty-three Black women and two Black men, two of whom identified as non-heterosexual in some way, although there were several others who chose not to label their sexual orientation. Interviews were conducted and recorded in person, via Zoom, or over the phone. Recordings were privately stored in a folder on my password protected computer. Interviews ranged from eleven minutes to an hour and a half in length. With this number of interviews, I was able to explicate three overarching themes related specifically to dating and hookup culture from participants' accounts of their experiences and observations, which will be further detailed and analyzed in the following three chapters. While the number may not be large enough to generalize across all PWIs, it serves as a case study that provides us with a snapshot into what Black social life is like on a Midwestern campus. Likely due to gender relatability, women were much

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[10] This is how I choose to identify in regard to my gender. For me, this is an intentional political decision to disrupt patriarchal conceptions of womanhood.

more responsive to recruitment efforts, and as a result they make up the majority of my study. At times, I will use 'Black students' and 'Black women' interchangeably when referring to the subjects of the study, as Black women speak to their observations of *all* Black students at JSU, both women and men; I am merely just speaking from their perspective. I further address the significance of my limited sample of Black collegiate men in the concluding chapter.

Qualitative methodology such as interviewing allows me to investigate how participants construct meanings around their identity related to different experiences, observations, and interactions, which is a facet of critical race feminism derived from Black feminist thought that emphasizes the use of lived experience as a source of knowledge production (Hill Collins 2000). The use of semi-structured interviewing allows for variation in participants' and the sharing of observations or experiences not directly indicated in my prepared questions. While I crafted a wide-ranging list of questions[11] to gather an exhaustive compilation of respondents' experiences, this approach allows for more flexibility in my engagement with them by allowing the opportunity to ask alternate or follow-up questions. Interviewees were required to provide written consent before the interview was conducted and given the option to stop the interview at any time (although this did not occur). After having difficult with recruitment, I offered to compensate participants ten dollars per interview. I was also given exemption from my role as a mandatory reporter by the university Title IX office in the event that participants discussed issues related to sexual assault or harassment. The centralization of marginalized narratives with the use of interviewing can be considered a

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[11] These questions can be found in Appendix B.

form of 'counter-storytelling' in response to the way in which white students' accounts of their experiences on college campuses are historically privileged in larger discussions around the institution of higher education (Yosso 2005). These counter-stories serve to offer a "critical reflection on the lived experiences and histories of People of Color" (Yosso 2005:10).

I chose participant observation as one of my qualitative methods to delve deeper into the experiences described by participants in interviews and personally observe certain dynamics that may not have been addressed from my own viewpoint as a researcher (Maxwell 2013). Because of my focus on the relationship between structure, identity, and interaction, my intent was to investigate the effects of racialized and gendered space on behavior as it pertains to dating and hooking up. This was somewhat limited due to the COVID-19 pandemic; as such, my fieldwork consisted of a mix of physical and virtual events and meetings. These events included 'going out' to a downtown bar known to be frequented by Black students, attending meetings of different Black undergraduate organizations, and going to a social homecoming event hosted at the Black student center on campus. The use of fieldwork as a way to become immersed in another culture is a historical method that I believe is applicable in the context of this research, as I am literally studying hookup 'culture' (Maanen 2011). While an observer, I was also at times an active participant in my fieldwork, interacting and speaking with participants when necessary. I used either a notebook that I have designated for fieldnotes, the 'Notes' application on my personal iPhone which is password protected to ensure privacy, or Post-It notes to jot down notes and observations during my observation

periods. After events, I transcribed the fieldnotes into Word documents that corresponded to that event and wrote analytical notes at the end of the documents.

I recruited participants through the distribution of a research flyer via e-mail to Black organizations on campus, sociology classes within my department (including my own), as well as word of mouth through different presentations I gave on this subject. My data was collected through this use of convenience sampling as well as snowball sampling, where participants informed peers and friends who might be interested in participating in the study. Through this recruitment, I was able to gain participants with a range in ages and years in school, as well as those from different ethnic or multiracial backgrounds.

## *Coding and Analysis*

Interviews were transcribed using two forms of software: ExpressScribe, where they were manually transcribed, and Otter, where they were automatically transcribed and subsequent reviewed to verify that transcriptions were accurate. Coding was done manually, with themes being identified as they relate to various aspects of dating and hookup culture, such as romantic experiences, sexual experiences, social life, Greek life, relationships, and partner preferences, amongst others. I used both inductive coding and deductive coding, identifying themes corresponding to my theoretical and conceptual approach, as well as those directly from the data. I analyzed the data using discursive content analysis, in which I categorized, classified, and summarized themes directly from the text data of both the interviews and fieldnotes as they related to my research questions and methodological approach (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). I was then able to interpret and draw conclusions from the data based on how they correlated with the larger theoretical

and conceptual framework of my research. Within this analytical framework, I position myself as a cultural interpreter that serves as an in-between for my subjects' narrative experiences and my (presumably) largely white audience's comprehension of them. It is crucial to the purpose of this study to contextually analyze Black cultural knowledge to clarify participants' ideas, attitudes, and perspectives for those outside of the community. With this, I try to maintain an equitable balance between the number of quotes and my analyses to leave adequate room for this interpretive work. As a part of this analytical process, I chose to use verbatim quotations from the interview data to wholly represent participants' authentic voices, emotions, and experiences (Patton 2001). This process of coding and analysis resulted in three overarching themes related to the data, which I will further discuss in the following three chapters.

## Literature Review

### *The History of Black Sexuality*

To fully grasp the impact that perceptions of Black sexuality has on Black youths' experiences with dating and hooking up requires a brief review of the historical construction of Black sexuality and Black gender ideology in the U.S. Since the era of slavery, Western society has associated the Black community with an uncivilized, uncontrollable, and deviant sexuality (Hill Collins 2004). This phenomenon led to the formation and circulation of controlling images, stereotypical images of Black culture that manipulate ideas about Black womanhood and manhood. While there are several, two that speak directly to Black sexuality are the jezebel, a sexually aggressive and hypersexual Black woman, and the Black male rapist, an image of Black men's uncontrollable sexuality that causes them to pursue and rape white women. The

normalization of these images has had significant consequences for society's treatment of Black sexuality and sexual behaviors, as well as Black men and women's understanding of their own sexual selves. This phenomenon has caused them to try and combat these stereotypes in various ways.

The idea of Black women as being naturally lascivious and promiscuous was used as a justification for sexual violence and institutional rape during slavery, as well as economic gain due to the production of slave labor (Hill Collins 2004; hooks 2015; Davis 1983), This has made it difficult for Black women to be viewed as victims of sexual assault (Crenshaw 1991), resulting in the lesser likelihood for them to formally report assault and the higher likelihood for them to use of race as a way to minimize their victimization (McGuffey 2013; Littleton and Dodd 2016). These stereotypes have also contributed to the construction of Black femininity in relation and opposition to normative white femininity, as the standard of white femininity was critical to the endurance of white supremacy which used Black women's labor to ensure economic success and political dominance for whites (Haley 2016). Further, white femininity is considered the global standard of beauty, with proximity to it being considered more attractive in communities of color (Hunter 2005). In the U.S. context, enslaved lighter-skinned Black people were systematically privileged and given 'better' opportunities for labor due to their relation to whiteness; as a result, lighter-skinned Black women with Eurocentric features such as light eyes and straighter hair were and still are considered not only more attractive, but more feminine, rendering darker skinned Black women as unattractive and masculine (Hunter 2005; Davis 1983). Circumstances such as these contributed to the masculinization of Black women due to their participation in hard

labor, but also hypersexualization due to their perceived promiscuity (Hill Collins 2004; Haley 2016). The emergence of convict leasing and chain gangs as an expansion of slavery post-Emancipation caused Black women's bodies to be constructed as sites of both potential criminal reproduction and unnatural hypersexuality; as a result, they were simultaneously subjected to particularly hard labor as well as threat of sexual violence and rape. The prevalence of racialized gender violence established and maintained the white supremacist order necessary for Jim Crow to flourish as an economic, social, and political institution of white power, which was possible due to the oppression, dehumanization, and degradation of Black women.

Black men's relationship with sexuality is likewise framed through white heteropatriarchal understandings of masculinity as it relates to Blackness. Black masculinity historically has been associated with physicality, sexual prowess, criminality, and violence (hooks 2015; Hill Collins 2004). The controlling image of the Black male rapist was in fact created to control Black men's' perceived uncontrollable sexuality post-Emancipation. This phenomenon also has its origins in slavery, where Black men were considered a threat to white women and racial purity and thus forbidden to engage in sexual relations with them (and faced violent punishment if caught doing so). To achieve status and power in retaliation to these emasculating processes, Black men adopted white patriarchal gender norms to gain upward mobility as a response to the association of Black male sexuality with lower- and working-class behavior (Hill Collins 2004). They've had historically fewer opportunities than women to enter the labor force due to the feminization of labor (Haley 2016; hooks 2015), taking away from the perceived 'natural' order of men being the head of the household. This led to the pathologization of

the Black family structure as naturally dysfunctional, poverty-stricken, and blameworthy for their social conditions (Davis 1990). In this way, the Black family structure has never conformed to the white patriarchal middle-classed nuclear family standard that society promotes as the ideal family structure (Hill Collins 1998). The anger, powerlessness, and dehumanization Black men feel because of white capitalist patriarchy has caused them to use their perceived sexual prowess to exercise power over white men by sexually subjugating them (hooks 2003). With no model for a healthy Black masculinity, Black men are socialized to adopt scripts of masculinity rooted in domination and subordination; as the Black male body became a site of fetishized sexual desire over time, Black men eventually utilized this to bolster a masculinity rooted in sexual dominance. These racial phenomena have affected the nature of social, romantic, and sexual relationships between and amongst Black men and women, particularly in terms of how they've been socialized to view and interact one another through the circulation of the controlling images mentioned above.

A common oversight within theorizations of Black sexuality is the inattention paid to non-heterosexual identities. Discourses within the literature historically tend to privilege heterosexual constructions of sexuality while excluding examinations of queer identity development and experience (White 2001; Lorde 2007; Cohen 1997). The association of Blackness with a natural hyper-heterosexuality caused the framing of homosexuality as a source of whiteness (Hill Collins 2004). As such, Black LGBTQ people are considered less authentically Black because of their engagement in presumably white practices, furthering the divide between Black and white sexuality. As a result, issues of homophobia and heterosexism within the Black community remain

rampant to this day. The historically significant role of the church in Black culture has helped to advance these ideas as well by blaming homosexuality for the loss of male role models, breakdown of the Black family structure, loss of traditional religious values, and emasculation of Black men by white oppression (Hill Collins 2004). Consequently, Black LGBTQ experiences are generally excluded from discussions of racism within Black communities. The emergence of queer theory has illuminated the ways in which heteronormativity interacts with racism, patriarchy, and capitalism to produce marginalized populations whose experiences of heterosexism and homophobia tend to be subdued due to the salience of race, class, and gender (Cohen 1997; Ferguson 2003). In fact, heterosexism is rooted in white supremacist ideology that has historically weaponized sexuality to designate who has access to rights and protections as a citizen; *all* slaves were subjected to physical and mental sexualized and gendered torture, including rape, lynching, and mutilation, regardless of sexuality and sexual orientation (Cohen 1997). The assumed privilege of heterosexuality hasn't protected Black people from violence and oppression, who've always occupied an 'abnormal' sexuality to begin with; to gain a better understanding of the racial construction of sexuality, we *must* consider the role of heterosexism within social systems of power.

Over time, Black people have developed various mechanisms to combat and challenge the normalization of sexual stereotypes, with respectability politics gaining prominence as one. For example, to protect themselves, middle-class Black women chose to reconstruct and represent their sexuality through silence, secrecy, and invisibility (Higginbotham 1992; Hammonds 1997); from their viewpoint, stereotypes couldn't persist if they weren't acknowledged. And because of their tenuous relationship with the

concept of womanhood, "to be positioned outside the "protection" of womanhood was to be labeled unrespectable" (White 2001:33) within the context of perceived normative femininity. Thusly, respectability was used as a method of resistance to counter racist and sexualized stereotypes of Black women by emphasizing ethical and moral behavior. Furthermore, this adherence to Victorian ideology was not only crucial to the protection and upward mobility of Black women, but to the attainment of respect, justice, and opportunity for all Black people (Higginbotham 1992). To emphasize their respectable and moral identities, middle-class women resorted to policing the behavior of lower-class and poor Black women in the name of protecting the race (Hammonds 1997). However, both working-class and middle-class women came together for the fight against sexual violence. In fact, the Civil Rights Movement was inspired by Black women's efforts to protect themselves from rape and sexualized violence despite dominant social narratives that have suggested otherwise (McGuire 2011). This illustrates how issues of sexuality have the potential to bridge gaps across classed lines, rather than strengthen them.

Acknowledging the complex history of Black sexuality is crucial in furthering our understanding of Black college students' attitudes and behaviors of dating and hooking up, as this discrete relationship is likely to affect their processes of interaction in ways that differ significantly from those described in the literature on dating and hooking up amongst white students.

*Conceptualizing Black Relationships*

The convoluted history of Black sexuality has greatly impacted the sexual and intimate relationships between Black men and women. The nature of these relationships is often characterized as strained, dysfunctional, and adversarial due to a perpetual battle

over respect, power, and control as a response to the powerlessness and deficiency felt within white dominant society (Hill Collins 2004; hooks 2015). However, this wasn't always the case; in the days of racial segregation that pushed Black men and women together, commitment wasn't considered as much of an issue (Hill Collins 2004). Black couples were able to transgress differences in gender by focusing on racial solidarity. As the proliferation of sexual and gender stereotypes increased over time due to the major expansion of mass media, Black people began to internalize and use these ideas to police one another's conformity to a flawed Black gender ideology (Hill Collins 2004). This has caused Black men to view Black women as unattractive and domineering, while Black women view Black men as unemotional and hypersexual, creating tension within these personal relationships (Hill Collins 2004). Wallace (2007) argues that gender socialization within Black families affects Black men's and women's performance of sex roles and gender scripts within romantic relationships. Black boys are taught to adhere to rigid definitions of masculinity that categorize showing emotion as weak or feminine, while Black girls are taught to be independent and economically responsible but also respectable enough to secure a man in the future. The linkage between sexuality and manhood teaches Black children that masculinity relies on sexual matters rather than intimate ones, leaving Black women at a disadvantage. This is likely why Hill Collins (2004) argues that Black men choosing to love and commit to Black women in a society that constantly demonizes and dehumanizes them is a radical and rebellious act.

Black queer folks also experience tension within their personal relationships. Their social issues are compounded by homophobia within the Black community and racism within the LGBTQ community. This ostracism often causes turmoil within

personal relationships, creating issues of intimate partner violence that are four times more likely to occur in communities of color (WOCN Inc. 2018). Homophobia and heterosexism within the Black community restrict Black queer folks from being able to fully explore their sexual identities, affecting their understandings of what healthy relationships can look like; within these interpersonal conflicts, individuals use heterosexist and/or normatively gendered insults, demonstrating the significant influence of heterosexism within Black communities (Hill Collins 2004). However, Mays et. al. (2008) find that Black lesbian women prefer to build romantic relationships with other Black women, describing more frequent experiences of discrimination within interracial relationships. This demonstrates the importance of racial solidarity within LGBTQ relationships and how it can be used to alleviate the stress of homophobia. Goode-Cross and Good (2008) also found that African American men who have sex with men find ways to create safe spaces for romantic and platonic relationships at PWIs, prioritizing their sense of belonging. These studies illustrate not only the complexity of Black LGBTQ experiences, but also the need for more research to be conducted on the intimate nature of these relationships.

However, scholars also consider the possibilities for Black love, sex, and intimacy as endless. Mosley-Howard and Evans (2000) critique the deficit-oriented approach to Black relationships, arguing that this limits opportunities for imagining a family structure based in cultural strength. Reframing the nature of these dynamics could allow for more equitable experiences within sexual relationships as well, where communicating desire and expectations is prioritized rather than avoided. Hill Collins (2004) further argues that without addressing the harms of heterosexism on both queer and heterosexual

relationships, dysfunctional and unhealthy gender dynamics will continue to be reinforced and replicated. Acknowledging sexual identity as a spectrum can work to challenge and deconstruct these narrow definitions of gender and sexuality that are based in white colonization, imperialism, and violence (Hill Collins 2004). This helps create revolutionary ideas of intimacy, love, and sex, where "resistance consists of loving the unlovable and affirming their humanity" (Hill Collins 2004:250).

*Hookup Culture in the Contemporary College Era*

The topic of hookup culture has been steadily gaining prominence in the fields of sociology and women's and gender studies over the past decade. Bogle (2008) argues that hooking up, casual physical encounters on the sexual spectrum that range from kissing to sexual intercourse, has seemingly taken over traditional dating on college campuses since the 1960s' sexual revolution. Larger studies within sociology, however, tend to privilege white populations within college settings, where race and sexual orientation aren't often an aspect of their gender analyses. Currently, 'hookup culture' appears to be read as 'white heterosexual hookup culture' in the larger discourse, which my research seeks to disrupt.

Bogle (2008), Freitas (2013), and Wade (2017) are three of the leading scholars on collegiate hookup culture, whose work has revealed one underlying theme: hooking up as a sexual subculture has emerged as the new social norm in college due to changing social discourses around sexuality, although the exact shift still hasn't been quite identified (Heldman and Wade 2010). Their work has been instrumental in understanding issues within hookup culture related to gendered sexual double standards, sexual scripts, consent, alcohol use, and college social life that are likely to be pervasive across many

different universities. The general understanding of hooking up it is that it lies on a spectrum from kissing to intercourse, including everything in between such as sexual touching, oral sex, and making out, with the expectation that the interaction is purely physical and will lead to nothing further emotionally (Bogle 2007; Wade 2017; Glenn and Marquardt 2001). As such, it's considered an ambiguous term that can shift depending on the social context. Although forms of hooking up may differ, the emphasis remains on a casual, no-strings attached, and short-lived sexual relationship. The process of initiating hook ups may also vary, but according to the literature it typically involves alcohol consumption, locating a potential partner in a social setting, initiating physical contact such as dancing or kissing, and ending in some form of sexual contact that emphasizes non-emotional interaction (Freitas 2013; Bogle 2008; Wade 2017; Hamilton and Armstrong 2013; Kuperberg and Padgett 2015). As stated previously, students are dating and hooking up at similar rates (Kuperberg and Padgett 2015), but relationships are more likely to develop from hooking up with the same person over a period of time rather than traditional dating processes (Bogle 2008; Freitas 2013). These factors contribute to the idea of hookup culture as "an occupying force, coercive and omnipresent" (Wade 2017:19) that pressures students to engage in hookup culture, even if they lack a desire to. Unsurprisingly, the pervasiveness of this culture also affects involvement in college social life. Those who choose to 'opt out' of hookup culture are also opting out of campus life to some degree; this affects their engagement with Greek organization life, party culture, and general non-academic sociability, as well as access to the status, popularity, and power that comes along with perceived attractiveness and

desirability (Hamilton and Armstrong 2013). Hooking up is more than just about sex-it's about the culture of social life on college campuses.

General analyses of hookup sex highlight its prioritization of men's pleasure over women's in sexually intimate experiences similar to the androcentric approach of pornographic sex (Dines 2010). MacKinnon (1989) argues that "a feminist theory of sexuality would locate sexuality within a theory of gender inequality" (316). Thus, to address the unequal experience of pleasure, one must analyze how gender inequality via implementing sexual scripts functions as a cause of this disparity (Wiederman 2005). Freitas (2013) utilizes a similar approach to hookup sex in her discussion of how the pressure to hook up leaves college students unsatisfied in order to conform to expectations. Direct communication is avoided during hookups due to associations with emotion and intimacy, leaving expectations of sexual desire and satisfaction unexpressed which positions women as especially vulnerable to sexual objectification and sexual submission (Freitas 2013). Their experiences of objectification, gender inequality, and exploitation are especially acute, with ideal hookups[12] differing significantly from substantive ones. The ideal image of hookup culture is seemingly one that serves as a source of sexual exploration in which equality, sex positivity, and nonjudgment are at the center; and although it's enjoyed in this way at times, most students, including men, feel that the pressure to hook up robs them of healthy, fulfilling sex lives, positive dating experiences, and loving relationships (Freitas 2013).

*The Blurriness of Consent in Hooking Up*

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[12] Ideal hookups are characterized by how closely the individual's sexual expectations are aligned with hookup scripts, according to a study by Krazter and Aubrey (2016 ).

The politics of hookup culture not only leave people sexually unsatisfied, but also susceptible to assault or rape. Studies on college rape culture address the effects of hookup culture on issues related to sexual assault, sexual violence, and consent on campuses (Kipnis 2017; Grigoriadis 2017). Grigoriadis (2017) discusses the mutually constitutive relationship of hookup and rape culture caused by the overwhelming pressure to hook up during college that creates difficulty in establishing terms of consent. The emphasis on non-communication as a way of conforming to the 'no strings attached' approach to sex and hooking up generates a culture where boundaries aren't distinctly drawn, and excessive alcohol consumption often contributes to this ambiguity as well. However, Kipnis (2017) examines this issue from the perspective that moral panics around sexual assault on college campuses blur lines between sexual paranoia and sexual assault, further complicating understandings of what sexual assault is and how to prevent it. According to Hirsch and Khan's (2020) concept of 'sexual geographies', "the spatial contexts through which people move and the peer networks that can regulate access to those spaces" (xix), these blurred lines are also a partial product of the politics of space that produce vulnerability, which can further the confusion that Kipnis references. This subset of research on campus culture gives us new ways to think about the role of consent, violence, and assault within hookup culture.

*Dating and Hooking Up in the Digital Age*

Within recent years, the literature on hookup culture has shifted to include the emerging influence of technology and social media on processes of initiating romantic and sexual interest, particularly in relation to the popularity of dating applications such as Tinder and Bumble. Scholars indicate that social media has significantly contributed to

the expansion of hookup culture, making it easier to initiate sexual or romantic engagement by requiring less physical or emotional effort (Pham 2017). The most recent ethnographic study on this topic is Paul's (2022) book *The Current Collegiate Hookup Culture: Dating Apps, Hookup Scripts, and Sexual Outcomes* where she explores the relationship between social media, hookup culture, and differing sexual scripts relative to physical versus technological meeting contexts. The newer age of hookup culture appears to rely less on physical initiations of hookups and more on virtual ones. This shift has impacted the current aversion to interpersonal communication within the nature of hooking up, continuing to alter social ideas, attitudes, and behaviors associated with contemporary sex and dating.

Regarding the role of race, statistics show that Black women and men are the least likely to selected or matched on Tinder and other dating/hookup applications, with Black women at the very bottom; in contrast, white men and Asian women report the highest response rates (Rudder 2015). This data indicates how perceptions of racial attractiveness and cultural stereotypes that exist in society trickle over into virtual spaces. Peck et. al. (2021) explores how white heterosexual college students use both overt and colorblind racist rhetoric to justify their aversion to Black potential matches, relying heavily on stereotypes that often conflate race with class. Despite this, Black adults are just as likely as their non-Black counterparts to use the application, although clearly with drastically different results. These experiences with online dating greatly affect Black college students' relationship with social media in college, as it continues to shape the dynamics of hookup culture (Lundquist and Curington 2019).

*The Racial Politics of Sex and Dating in College*

The role of race in mechanisms of dating and hooking has been given less critical attention in larger studies on the subject. The narrative that students of color are less likely to hook up due to cultural differences such as religion, moral values, and ethnic backgrounds is often shared across scholars' analyses (Bogle 2008; Freitas 2013; Wade 2017). For Black students' specifically[13], research shows that they *are* engaging in casual sexual encounters in college, but these experiences discussed in broader terms of sexual behaviors and dating rather than 'hooking up' specifically. This literature reveals a wide variety of themes related to intimacy, attitudes towards sex, sexual health, and partner preferences that affect Black students' social experiences in college. Nonetheless, research work needs to be conducted on their experiences with hookup culture specifically due to its growing relationship with campus life that affects *all* students.

Research on Black college students' social and academic experiences at predominantly white institutions have exposed issues of racism, stereotype threat, microaggressions, and social exclusion from dominant white student populations (Morales 2014). These experiences significantly influence not only students' perceptions of race regarding belonging, as they tend to create their own distinct and oppositional racial communities as a response to exclusion (Smith and Moore 2015), but also their attitudes towards sex and dating. Studies on their dating and sexual encounters specifically tend to focus on perspectives towards interracial dating rather than intraracial dating. For example, studies have shown that Black women are less likely to engage in interracial dating or casual sex due to racist and sexist interactions and assumptions that white men aren't interested in Black women. They're also heavily critical of Black

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[13] I choose to focus on Black students due to their unique and complex history with sexuality, which I reviewed earlier in this section.

men/white women interracial pairings as a threat to the desirability of Black women (Schoepflin 2009; McClintock & Murry 2010; Stackman et. al. 2016). On the other hand, Black men are more likely to approve of and engage in interracial dating and hookups, especially athletes and other Black men of higher social status such as fraternity members (Schoepflin 2009; McClintock & Murry 2010; Stackman et. al. 2016). Despite their differing views on interracial dating, however, both genders face experiences of being stereotyped by their white peers as exotic, hypersexual, and aggressive, particularly within the context of Blackness being conflated with low class status and behavior (Morales 2014). Black men discussed having to alter their gender performance to appear sexually non-threatening to white women, and Black women discussed dealing with gender and sexual microaggressions over assumptions of promiscuity by white men. Overall, the literature suggests that both Black men and women prefer to date or hook up intraracially at PWIs, but Black women report a more limited partner pool overall than Black men due to larger numbers of Black women in higher education, as well as their aversion to dating interracially (Stackman et. al. 2016; Morris 2014). Black students at PWIs are clearly aware of the racial, gender, and sexual stereotyping that comes along with their proximity to whiteness, and as such their experiences navigating potential sexual or romantic partnership largely differ from their white counterparts.

The limited research that focuses on Black college students' experiences with casual sexual encounters specifically often focuses on issues of sexual health and sexual risk. According to Younge et. al. (2013), Black students at HBCUs tend to be at higher risk for contracting sexually transmitted infections during college as compared to other racial groups. Jenkins Hall and Tanner (2016) argue that these statistics are even more

significant for college age Black women, who perceive themselves as low risk but in actuality are high risk for STI and HIV acquisition. Ferguson et. al. (2006) argues that this elevated risk is likely due to an imbalanced gender ratio that causes multiple Black women to share one Black male sexual partner and inconsistent condom use, placing them at higher risk for HIV/AIDs. These are surprising data considering that white college students have more hookup partners and hookup encounters than their Black peers, according to research (Ross et. al. 2014). While these studies are helpful in identifying patterns of sexual risk and sexual health amongst Black student populations, their experiences with hookup culture beyond risk and health need to be investigated as well.

The extent to which Black students' awareness of sexual stereotypes affects their own relationships with internalization or resistance tends to vary. For example, history shows that larger discourses surrounding attractiveness promote Eurocentric standards of beauty as the ideal, positioning Black women as less feminine, more masculine, and less attractive in comparison (Hill Collins 2000). Both Black women and Black men have internalized this to a certain degree, primarily due to the influence of media. College students who consume media at higher rates are more likely to adopt or endorse traditional gender ideologies and/or sexual stereotypes of Black women such as the jezebel or sapphire, which also correlates to higher levels of sexual risk (Jerald et. al. 2017; Hall and Witherspoon 2015). Watson et. al. (2015) also found that Black women who are sensitive to media images tend to have lower bodily satisfaction in terms of weight and appearance. Black college men echoed similar sentiments in another study on their perceptions of Black women's body attractiveness at both PWIs and HBCUs (Webb

2014). While larger body figures are ordinarily considered the beauty norm within Black culture, as Black men adjust to the dominant culture in college their perceptions of attractiveness are subject to change; some men begin to associate weight with attractiveness, which is reflective of dominant, Eurocentric standards of beauty that promote thinness as ideal (Bordo 2004). However, students with stronger relationships to their race or ethnicity were more protected from negative influences of media on their gender beliefs (Jerald et. al. 2017). The effects of racialized and gendered stereotyping on college students' impressions of each other are still significant, though, and Black men are not exempt. Ford (2012) shows how Black college women utilize stereotypical ideals of Black masculinity, such as the 'thug', 'player', or 'endangered black man', to discuss their partner preferences and relationship expectations. As we can see, these processes of internalization affect perceptions of both femininity and masculinity. Black college students appear to be generally aware of how stereotypical constructions of race affect their sexual and romantic interests. This research offers a glimpse into how historical notions of Black gender and sexuality continued to complicate Black college students' relationship to sex and dating today.

*Queering Hookup Culture*

Within the literature on hookup culture, there is noticeably less attention paid to the specific experiences of LGBTQ populations as compared to their heterosexual peers (Heldman and Wade 2010). While larger studies are critical of the heteronormative nature of hookup culture and its effects on non-heterosexual students' involvement, these discussions tend to be brief, less descriptive, and reinforce prevailing narratives about LGBTQ students being less likely to engage due to perceived heterosexism and

homophobia (Bogle 2008; Freitas 2013; Wade 2017). Although research has demonstrated the validity of these claims, newer studies on the experiences of LGBTQ students with hooking up reveal that their methods of participation both challenge and uphold heteronormative elements of hookup culture. Rupp (2014) argues that the sexually "liberal" characterization of hookup culture serves as an opportunity for women to explore same-sex attraction or desire through public kissing, engagement in threesomes, etc. that has the potential to lead to non-heterosexual identification. However, this also bespeaks the gendered nature of hooking up, given the fetishization of women's intimacy by the male gaze that allows for this exploration. On a related subject, Kuperberg and Walker (2018) examine the motivations of college students who hook up with same-sex partners but identify as heterosexual, with reasons ranging from wanting to engage in private sexual experimentation to holding onto strong religious beliefs and internalized homophobia. This challenges perceptions of sexual identity as being fixed or static, and instead points to postmodern ideas of sexuality as a fluid identity that exists on a spectrum rather than in a categorical box (Stein and Plummer 1994).

LGBTQ students' relationship with hookup culture is markedly different than that of their heterosexual counterparts, while still being influenced by heteronormativity. Lamont's (2018) study reveals that while LGBTQ students' critical awareness of dominant hookup culture causes them to directly challenge heteronormative practices by emphasizing communication and consent and queering standards of pleasure, many of them also replicate gendered performances in the process of hooking up, demonstrating one of ways in which sexuality continues to be constructed through normative and binary understandings of gender (Inagraham 1994). These works illustrate that LGBTQ

students' have complex relationships with sexuality and hooking up in college beyond overly simplified categorizations, which needs to be further explored along with the role of race. Currently, there is little research on the experiences of LGBTQ students of color with dating and hooking up. Specifically, Black LGBTQ students have advocated steadily for their inclusion in Black communities on college campuses, but are still commonly met with rejection and exclusion, causing them to create their own alliances separate from their heterosexual peers (Lenning 2017). Circumstances such as these serve to further the divide between Blackness and queerness. Patton's (2011) study on Black gay and bisexual men's experiences with sexual identity at an HBCU found that although the men felt as though they had an overall supportive environment regarding their sexual identity at the institution, they were still inclined to identify more strongly with their race and gender as Black men rather than their sexual identity as gay or bisexual. Although their sexual orientation was important to them, it was a less salient aspect of their identity than race, and their connection to the Black community was stronger than that to the LGBTQ community. This gives us a glimpse into the complex process of how individuals who occupy several marginalized positions choose to navigate the different intersections of their identity (Crenshaw 1989). More research needs to be done on LGBTQ students' college social lives to fully explore the impact of gender, race, and sexual orientation on their processes of dating and hooking up.

**Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

My theoretical and conceptual approach to unpacking the social politics of Black undergraduate college culture as it pertains to dating and hooking up are those that draw from Black feminist theory, sexuality studies, and spatial theory. Below, I provide a brief

overview of each concept and theory and further explain how I utilize them in my analytical approach to the research.

*Intersectionality*

The theory of intersectionality originates from Crenshaw's (1989) legal analysis of historical court cases that hindered Black women from occupying at once the seemingly mutually exclusive categories of race and gender as a site of discrimination. This prohibited them from adequately challenging their distinct and unique form of oppression from a legal standpoint. Her perspective as a legal scholar helps us to understand how structurally, intersectionality is rendered imperceptible due to the positioning of laws to address single axis cases of discrimination, namely race *or* gender, rather than both. She argues that this is insufficient in addressing the full complexity of identity and exposing the multilayered and intricate aspects of systems of oppression such as racism and sexism. This theory has long operated as a foundational ideology within the realm of Black feminist theory, even before it was coined as such (The Combahee River Collective 1977; Davis 1983; hooks 2015). As a theoretical lens, it has been utilized within sociology and other related social sciences to analyze any number of intersections, such as religion, age, ability, ethnicity, gender identity, etc., as points of simultaneous privilege, oppression, power, and subordination.

Intersectionality has also been utilized by scholars to explore the relationship of sexuality with other interconnected systems of power. For example, Hill Collins' (2005) concept of the 'matrix of domination' can be viewed as an intersectional paradigm, which "refers to how these intersecting oppressions are actually organized…regardless of the particular intersections involved….domains of power reappear across quite different

forms of oppression" (21). She uses it to explain how controlling images of Black men and women, particularly those that portray sexualized stereotypes such as the jezebel and Black male rapist, are used to keep Black sexuality controlled and regulated through domains of power such as heteronormativity, capitalism, and patriarchy. This conceptual approach helps further our understanding of how systems of oppression interconnect to produce different manifestations of power. Roberts (1997) expands on this discussion by using an intersectional lens to investigate how policies used to control reproductive rights have impacted Black family structures, contributing to negative stereotypes about Black sexuality as uncontrollable and lascivious. Hill Collins (2004) further discusses this phenomenon in her discussion of Black sexual politics and how Black relationships are impacted by historical framings of Black sexuality as it intersects with gender, race, and class. These derivatives of intersectionality offer more critical insight into how sexuality as an intersection of identity contributes to the production of various systems of power.

Queer theorists have further expanded upon the use of intersectionality to critique the interrelated systems of heterosexism and homophobia. Somerville (2000) problematizes the idea that constructions of race are separate from those of sexuality by looking at how the language of scientific racism was akin to language used in sexology studies on what constituted 'normal' sexuality. This points to how race was constructed through the lens of not only class and gender, but sexuality as well. Ferguson's (2003) theory of a 'queer of color critique' critiques materialist feminism[14] by asserting that emphasis on materiality might conceal the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality as

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[14] Materialist feminism focuses on the role of capitalism within the categorizations of men and women, which would be nonexistent outside of a relationship of inequality. This theory emphasizes that meanings of gender are conditioned by social processes involving relations of power, rather than being natural or essential (Brickell 2006).

they are conditioned and constructed by the capitalist state. The state's regulation of

nonwhite labor was intentional in forcing African Americans into normative gender and

sexual roles, which in turn produced discourses that pathologized nonheteronormative

U.S. racial formations. Cohen (1997) takes this idea a step further by calling for a new

political direction of queer politics and activism that broadens society's understanding of

queerness. This requires recognition of how numerous systems of oppression interact to

regulate the lives of queer people of color. The ways in which heteronormativity operates

as a power structure works to bolster racist, patriarchal, and class exploitation of certain

groups; thus, the role of capitalism in the formation of state-regulated institutions and

economic systems as agents of social control in terms of exploitation and violence must

be a central part of the conversation in queer theory and politics. These works look to

highlight the invisibility of queerness in theorizations of sexuality, particularly as they

pertain to race and class.

Utilizing intersectionality as an analytical approach allows me to examine and

analyze how different facets of power constructed within and through each other results

in a distinctly different experience for Black students in college navigating dating and

hooking up. More definitively, I'm interested in the specific intersections of gender, race,

class, sexuality, and space, using the university as a domain of power that produces and

reinforces hierarchal systems such as racism, sexism, and classism that affect Black

students' social lives. Heldman and Wade (2010) argue that studies on hook-up culture

lack intersectional lenses, leading to one-dimensional understandings of how hookup

culture is organized and structured. Assumptions about marginalized students'

engagement with hooking up, such as claims that people of color, religious people, or

disabled people are less likely to participate in hookup culture doesn't delve into the particularities of *why* this may be, and if they do choose to, *how* it may be different from their peers who fall in socially dominant categories. As discussed previously, the Black community's relationship with sexuality has been notably complex; by using intersectionality, I'm looking to unpack how Black college students' sexual attitudes are impacted by the aggregation of various intersections that inform their experiences.

*Spatial Imaginaries*

The function of space in processes of dating and hooking up is often discussed in terms of students' utilization of virtual space to initiate hook ups via dating applications, designation of which places are optimal for hooking up, and determination of which social settings are convenient for identifying potential hookup partners (Bogle 2008; Hamilton and Armstrong 2013; Wade 2017). Location plays a crucial role in the overall function of dating and hookup culture; however, it is also deeply political in terms of power, accessibility, and ownership. As such, I'm interested in a deeper interrogation of space beyond physical parameters that analyzes the embeddedness of gender, race, class, and sexuality within domains of power such as the university, and how this ultimately effects processes of dating and hooking up.

The development of higher education as something exclusively offered to wealthy white men permanently affected the structure of universities. Omi and Winant (2014) argue that "race is a social construction and not a fixed, static category…it varies according to time and place" (15). Over time, these changing racial meanings and representations become absorbed into social structures, which then organize and administer essential resources along racial lines. These racial projects, representations of

race that are assigned meaning through being situated within social structures, can be used to either challenge or reproduce a particular system. The formation of the predominantly white university as a white and patriarchal institution can be framed as a conservative racial project that highlights the historical normalization of whiteness as an imperialist and colonialist venture in the historical efforts to claim property, land, and space as its own (Lipsitz 2011). However, the components of this project shifted after nonwhite and nonmale students were deemed fit to be admitted. Currently, the neoliberal ideas of diversity and inclusion that these universities often promote in an attempt to rectify past inequities *could* be characterized as a liberal, anti-racist racial project that challenges, rather than enhances, racism (Lewis 2019). Nevertheless, though, these universities continue to operate as spaces where marginalized students face covert and overt displays of racism along with other interlocking forms of oppression such as sexism, classism, and homophobia, with no tangible efforts being made to effectively change the culture of campus. Attempting to embrace liberal, color-blind ideas of democracy and equal opportunity to portray inclusivity while at the same time refusing to explicitly address how the historically racist and sexist structure of the university affects marginalized students does little to adequately challenge interlocking systems of oppression on predominantly white campuses.

The racial formation of the PWI as a racial project can be further understood through the lens of Lipsitz's (2011) theory of spatial imaginaries. While he situates this perspective within the context of racial segregation and its impact on housing discrimination and the creation of suburbia, I believe his description of the theory is remarkably applicable to the establishment of higher education. The predominantly white

institution can be defined as a white spatial imaginary, which refers to "the ideal of pure and homogenous space through exclusiveness, exclusivity, and homogeneity" (13) that "idealizes…controlled environments, and predictable patterns of design and behavior" (29). It exists not to solve social problems but keep them hidden in order continue providing resources to racially privileged groups. For these spaces to exist homogenously, they rely on "the exclusion of others deemed different, deficient, and nonnormative" (29). In response to exclusion from these white homogenous spaces, Blacks seek to create their own democratic institutions as a direct challenge to these white controlled spaces. Thus, a Black spatial imaginary, "a counter-spatial imaginary based on sociability and augmented use value…in which minority communities privilege solidarities within, between, and across spaces" (69), is born. These spaces are formed to create a sense of racial community within predominantly white spaces (Smith and Moore 2015). As such, a portion of my research points to the existence of a Black spatial imaginary as existing *within* a white spatial imaginary, with their imaginary serving as a site for Black students predominantly date and hook up using their own mechanisms. I expand upon the theory of the spatial imaginary by arguing that space is rarely only structured by just race, but other systems of power as well. Thus, Black students navigate the structure of higher education in various ways according to the different intersections of their identity; this demonstrates how the relation between social location and social structure can impact individual and collective behavior. Using this predominantly white setting can reveal the different social politics involved in the racialization of space, and how this may result in potential constraints or liberties that can affect certain power dynamics. Lipsitz (2011) argues that to achieve legitimate social justice, the U.S. must

disassemble the unhealthy relationship between race, place, and power; I'm inclined to agree.

<u>*Black Sexual Politics*</u>

The concept of Black sexual politics, coined by Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins (2004), refers to the "ideas and social practices shaped by gender, race, and sexuality that frame Black men and women's treatment of each other" (7). She argues that using a politics of sexuality is necessary to effectively analyze perceptions of Black femininity and Black masculinity, particularly as they're constructed in relation to each other. In the new era of mass media and popular culture that exploded in the 1990s', different gendered and sexualized ideas and stereotypes surrounding Black men and women were disseminated more widely than ever before. The circulation, institutionalization, and normalization of these controlling images, particularly those that speak to Black sexuality such as the jezebel and the Black male rapist, impacted Black peoples' conception of their own gender and sexual identities in various ways (Hill Collins 2004). Recent studies have shown that Black youth are very much aware of these images and tend to engage in strategies of both conformity and resistance. In certain social contexts, youth who seemingly internalize these images tend to have more "negative" behavioral outcomes, such as alcohol and drug use, lower self-esteem, endorsement of racialized beauty standards, engaging in risky sexual behaviors, and having multiple sexual partners (Peterson et. al. 2007; Townsend et. al. 2010). Others who are resistant to these images become more entrenched in their sexual moral values, resist sexual coercion, embrace personal responsibility as a form of empowerment, find ways to embrace sexual autonomy and locate sexual desire, and utilize social media to

explore different aspects of sexuality (French 2013; Stokes 2007). This is particularly salient within hip hop culture and its portrayal of Black men as gangsters, thugs, and pimps, and Black women as strippers, sex workers, and video hos (Rose 2008). For example, one aspect of Carney et. al.'s (2015) study illustrates how Black girls find it difficult to situate their complex sexual desires within discourses of pleasure rather than pain. Due to their complicated relationship with having to choose between a 'right' (respectable, middle-class version of sexuality) and 'wrong' (hypersexual, lower-class version of sexuality) version of Black womanhood that's depicted in hip hop, girls find it difficult to occupy a 'normal 'sexuality. In comparison, Love's (2017) work on the Black ratchet imagination examines how Black queer youth engage in processes of resistance to heteronormative and homophobic portrayals of Blackness within hip hop spaces through dance, community engagement, and music. Thus, although Hill Collin's (2004) analysis is situated within the context of mass media, it is clear how larger sociopolitical forces embedded in the macro level influence the micro level everyday behavior amongst and between Black people.

As a result of these various factors, "the relationship between gender and race is intensified" (Hill Collins 2004:6) for Black men and women, which contributes to what she refers to as a unique 'Black gender ideology'. Historically, assimilation to white heterosexual gender norms has been framed as a sign of upward mobility and racial progress, resulting in a gender ideology based in male domination, heterosexism, and misogyny. By internalizing this ideology, Black men and women learn to police one another's conformity to dominant, flawed gender norms, which then produces an antagonistic relationship based in power and subordination. However, because Blackness

occupies a deviant, hyper-heterosexuality in relation to a normal, natural white

heterosexuality, Black men and women have never been able to adhere to traditional

gender roles. As a result, Black masculinity is based in sexual dominance and control,

where Black men tend to search for respect and authority in marginal social locations due

to exclusion from positions of power on a societal level, while Black women accept ideas

around Black male hypersexuality and criminality that uphold white patriarchal ideas of

manhood. Due to silence around issues of gender and sexuality within the Black

community, which are framed as a distraction from racial progress, there is a lack of

public discussion around the fraught history of Black sexuality. The concept of Black

sexual politics looks to facilitate and expand this discussion.

 This approach allows for me to address in specific ways the unique and distinctive

relationship between and amongst Black men and women along the lines of race, gender,

sexuality, and class, and how this can affect processes of dating and hooking up.

Considering how entry into higher education is seen as a marker of upward mobility for

Black people (Davis 1990), I'm interested in the ways that aspects of Black gender

ideology operate in this classed space, as well as how Black sexual politics inform not

only Black college students' experiences with dating and hooking up, but their overall

social experiences in college. In the new era of mass media where social media, dating

applications, and mainstream hip-hop music have allowed for even larger consumptions

of Black culture, images, and ideas (Rose 2008), the emphasis on a technologically

driven society is likely to continue to affect perceptions of Black sexuality, and as a

result, Black people's relationship with each another. Wade (2017) contends that hooking

up in college generally relies on gender norms and normative sexual scripts to function in

the way that it does; I argue that the concept of Black sexual politics allows us to explore how hookup culture also relies on constructions of race.

## **Conclusion**

The subject of collegiate hookup culture has become increasingly popular within the fields of sociology, sexuality studies, and women's and gender studies as collective ideas of sexuality continue to shift over time, especially with the expansion of technology and social media (Paul 2022). The continued merging of hookup culture with broader college social life makes this research crucial in furthering our understanding of the social organization of higher education. As scholars continue to study this seemingly resolute phenomenon, I urge them to be more mindful of how marginalized populations' social positionality within this culture are impacted by dominant notions of race, class, gender, and sexuality. With research steadily being conducted on the social experiences of Black college students (Tichavakunda 2022), politics of sexuality as they relate to methods of dating and hooking up will likely surface as an aspect of campus life. Focusing on these aspects of campus life can be used to explore different social processes that affect Black students' sexual and romantic behaviors and attitudes towards Black relationships. Further, my interest in how Black students' social navigation of dating and hookup culture in a white dominated space illuminates the roles that race, place, and power play in students' conception of their racialized, sexualized, and gendered identities during college. By getting a glimpse into how these different intersections impact Black sexual identity, we can better see how the social behaviors and attitudes that the participants describe are reflective of power dynamics within our broader white supremacist, capitalist, heteronormative, patriarchal society. As such, intersectional

approaches to this area of higher educational research are critical to broadening our understanding of the complexity of college dating and hookup culture. My study speaks directly to these scholarly concerns, while at the same time acknowledging and highlighting the particular narratives of Black college students, whose voices and experiences have been historically silenced despite their continuous efforts to be seen and heard.

The following chapters will examine the three overarching themes gleaned from my data analysis. Chapter 1 will explore how Jefferson State University operates as a white spatial imaginary that creates racial parameters of social life and hookup culture through social exclusion. Black women often associate this white hookup culture with culturally different and non-respectable sexual practices, which they seek to distance themselves from. This desire for distance is also an effect of their experiences with gendered racism through encounters with objectification, fetishization, and ostracism, which contributes to their general aversion to both sexual and romantic interracial relationships. Chapter 2 will explore how Black students formulate a Black spatial imaginary grounded in racial solidarity and support by creating their own social and cultural spaces on and off campus. However, involvement in the social Black community is regulated by an informal social hierarchy based on racial authenticity, class status, and heterogender norms that creates a Black heteropatriarchal space in which dating and hooking up occur. These politics also play out online, where the sexualized culture of Black social media within the Black student community is utilized as a way to navigate sexual or romantic interest. Chapter 3 will explore the critical role of Black sexual politics in Black women's awareness of how social perceptions and representations of

Black femininity and Black masculinity impact sexual and romantic relationships between and amongst Black men and women on campus and in general. I examine how the current state of Black gender ideology from the perspective of Black women is affected by the perceived reticence of Black masculinity, standards of beauty, and normalization of misogynoir that aids in the cultivation of a Black feminist consciousness among Black collegiate women. The conclusion chapter will summarize the major themes described in the previous chapters and their contributions to research, as well as address limitations to the study and the implications my findings have for scholarly research within the field of sociology and the expansion of our knowledge on the social experiences of Black college students.

# CHAPTER ONE: MANEUVERING RACE, GENDER, CLASS, AND SEX(UALITY) IN A WHITE SPATIAL IMAGINARY

## Introduction

My research site, Jefferson State University, is a large, historically predominantly white public university in the Midwest. To give you a better idea of just how *large*, the total undergraduate student population of the university is currently around 30,000. To give you a better idea of just how predominantly *white*, the percentage of white students is around 73%, which equates to about 24,000 people. Finally, to give you a better idea of just how *historic*, the school was founded in the mid-1800s, denying admittance to white women until the late 1800s; for Black students, not until over a century later[15]. Today, in comparison to the sizable percentage of white students, Black students make up just around 6% of the student population, which equates to about 2000 students. I hope these statistics give you a clearer picture of how historically predominantly white institutions are still structured by race; and how this continues to affect the way that Black undergraduate students maneuver through social life and social spaces.

Scholars describe how the structure of the university helps to facilitate campus social life for students through the historical provision of resources for student success (Hamilton and Armstrong 2013; Jozkowski 2017). This structure provides opportunities for primarily middle- and upper-class students to initiate and engage in sexual behaviors without interference from the university, creating a hookup culture that's more about the social climate on campus than it is about sexuality (Wade 2017). However, considering

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[15] The establishment of predominantly white universities along the lines of both race and gender points to the historically racist and patriarchal formation of PWIs. This is significant when considering how intersecting systems of power impact how spaces are organized and controlled.

the history of the PWI, white students are accustomed to having control over the function of these spaces, and I argue that this control includes regulating access to opportunities for sex and dating. Scholars often explore this regulation through gender and class rather than race, which I look to disrupt. I view hookup culture as another space in which white students exert control and distribution of resources and explore the consequences of when this dominance is perceived as threatened.

In the following sections, I examine how Black women's interactions with the white student population impact navigation of sexual life on campus. Black students use classed ideas of race to distance themselves from the perceived cultural differences in white sexual behaviors and attitudes, which I attribute in part to differences in sexual socialization. These preconceived notions are affirmed through experiences with white students, with Black students categorizing them as unscrupulous and carefree in their approach to hooking up while asserting that Black students are more conscientious. These social interactions also reveal the heightened racial tension on campus due to the Midwestern locale of the university that causes Black students to seek solidarity with each other by creating a distinct racial community. They share their encounters with gendered racism through experiences of objectification, fetishization, and rejection, not only in the physical space of campus, but on social media platforms such as dating applications. These experiences largely influence a general aversion to both sexual and romantic interracial relationships, which was often discussed in reference to Black women being seen as undesirable and unattractive to white men. However, they also describe their own feelings of distaste with white men who don't fit certain characteristics, acting as agentic subjects in the construction of their own structures of

desire (Green 2008). In the following sections, I analyze from the perspective of Black collegiate women how the culture of the white student population reflects characteristics of the white spatial imaginary, in how white students engage in ways to reassert Jefferson State University as a homogenously exclusive white space through various means, and where "whiteness is inscribed in the physical contours of the place" (28).

## Black Students' Perceptions of White Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors

Sexual socialization, also referred to as simply 'sexualization', is a social process in which individuals, through interaction with family, peers, school, and the media, develop sexual self-concepts, values, attitudes, and behaviors (Spanier 1977). This process is often accompanied by the learning and internalization of gender roles and norms, as ideas and meanings attached to gender and sexuality are often linked. In the introductory chapter, I briefly outlined how historical constructions of Black sexuality have been created using white sexuality as the norm. In other words, the idea of a normalized white sexuality is constructed through and dependent upon a deviant Black sexuality (Hill Collins 2004). Due to the social marking of Black sexuality as abnormal through the proliferation of sexualized controlling images in various social institutions such as mass media, little attention has been played to the critical role of whiteness in the meanings and behaviors associated with sexuality (Brekhus 1998; Hill Collins 2004). These racial meanings of sexuality influence this process of sexual socialization. Black people have struggled to use different mechanisms such as respectability politics or adhering to middle-class ideas and behaviors deemed respectable by the dominant society (Higginbotham 1994; White 2001), to challenge these notions of deviant sexuality. These attempts, however, have been broadly ignored by white society (hooks 2015), although

Black people, especially those from middle- to upper-class backgrounds, continue to use it as a lens to view one another. And though historically, white men have enacted sexual violence again Black women through the institutionalized and legalized rape of slaves, white men are not stereotyped as barbarous rapists; instead, Black men have been faced with, and killed, with this stereotype due to the false accusations of white women, and yet they also are not stereotyped as being sexually depraved (hooks 2015; Hill Collins 2004; Davis 1983). White people simply do not have to challenge sexual stereotypes in the way that Black people have, because of the protection that whiteness affords. They benefit from being seen as inhabiting a normal sexuality, which I argue allows them to engage in sexual behaviors seen by Black people as non-respectable. Black people, but especially Black women, have not been afforded this freedom because due to the scrutinization of their sexuality, causing them to find ways to protect their sexual identities.

*The Perceived Sexual Laxity of Whiteness*

Participants spoke openly about how white people's cultural sexual norms differ from how Black people were socialized to think about sex. They often emphasized the lackadaisical attitude they perceive white men and women have about public displays of affection, hooking up with random people via dating applications, and even sharing sexual partners with friends. When speaking about these differences, the women spoke in ways that implied that white people inhabit immoral sexual practices that lack caution and safety, which is stressed in the Black community. The women spoke openly about the necessity to protect themselves from assault, drugging, and even death, and how this was a priority for them but not the white students on campus. One of the participants pointed out that familial differences might account for these differences:

"Um, I don't want to say nothing that comes off wrong, but like, I feel like Black people and Black families have like strict rules on like, having sex and stuff. So like, our race will be less likely to do it. Not that much less. But like, you know, white people are probably more free to do that."

**-Harry, 21, single**

These strict rules that Harry, who chose her own pseudonym, is speaking of are a common part of sexual socialization within Black families that she believes isn't as emphasized within white ones. While respectability politics is often critiqued as classist and oppressive, this mechanism is often shared with Black children, especially Black girls, to prepare them for how wider society perceives their sexual identities as hypersexual (Carney et. al. 2016; Morris 2014). In Harry's opinion, white people have fewer restrictions on their exploration of sexuality, and I believe this is likely due to the lack of sexual stereotypes attached to white sexuality. This may be a reason why she and other participants would mention overhearing white students talk openly on campus about their hookup experiences, but not Black ones. Many of the women shared this perception of white people being 'free' to explore their sexuality in ways that Black women feel they can't, and in fact, often emphasize that they don't *want* to. One of the women referenced this by saying:

"Yeah. The white people, they're more, they're more carefree. They're better than I am. Because I can't do it. They just like, they're just like more like, spontaneous, I could say, yeah."

**-Brianna, 18, single**

This carefree nature was also associated with white students' use of dating applications such as Tinder. Many of the women reported being uninterested in it due to the emphasis on casual sex with unknown people, and in fact Elena referred to the use of the application as 'desperate'. At a later point in the interview, Brianna also made a remark that she doesn't trust this 'spontaneity' because she's concerned for her safety as

a Black woman and thinks "meeting up with someone that I've never even seen in person before is just kind of sketchy". Kelly spoke to this as well; she said "I'm gonna find somebody that knows you that can tell me if I go to your house, I'm not gonna come back in a body bag, you know what I'm saying?" Brianna echoed this, adding:

> "Like as a Black woman, like as a *woman*, you have to be cautious in general, because folks is crazy. Being a Black woman you have to be more cautious because folks is crazy, and also I'm kind of scared of the police. So (laughs), extra extra caution. And then like, also like, when like as I grew up, like I always read or saw, like different stories about like, Black girls, you know, getting like, kidnapped and like killed and they're like going out and meeting up with people that they don't really know. And like kind of instilled like a fear of like, going and doing the same thing because I don't want to end up in a situation. Because yeah, mm mm, mm mm."
>
> **-Brianna, 18, single**

This cautionary approach to online dating was echoed by other women as well, who expressed their suspicion in meeting up with someone they didn't know:

> "But yeah, I wouldn't feel safe…is one of the reasons I didn't online date before, I wouldn't feel safe, like, meeting someone I didn't know and then just like, hooking up."
>
> **-Maya, 20, in a relationship**

Due to the overwhelming popularity of Tinder, many of the women admitted that they thought about and tried to use the application, but for various reasons either quickly changed their minds or continued to avoid it:

> "I don't know. It's so weird to not know anything about the person and just like not have a face to put it to. Like, it doesn't matter what they look like. But it's kind of alarming not to know what someone looks like 'cause then again, like it just-that not knowing the identity is just not something I feel so secure about."
>
> **-Bisa, 20, in a relationship**

Their comments directly reflect Black women's awareness of their abuse by institutional and state forms of violence that has been historically justified, ignored, and

dismissed. According to the Institute for Women's Policy Research, Black women are almost three times as likely to be murdered by men, and yet their cases tend to gain less attention and scrutiny in the media and by police (Barlow 2020). The recent 2022 case of 23-year-old Lauren Smith-Fields, a Black woman who died under mysterious circumstances after going on a date with a white man that she met on the dating application Bumble, is a real-life example of how these cases get portrayed in the media (CBS News 2022). The man in question hasn't been charged or arrested, though he was the one to report her dead, and the family is openly criticizing the police investigation, or lack thereof, as being racially insensitive. This sadly demonstrates how pertinent these issues still are today and how these concerns are not imagined, but rather based in reality and close to home. Crenshaw (1991) explains how the legal system isn't arranged to address the intersectional injustices against women of color, meaning that violence enacted against them tends to be ignored and disregarded. For example, let's consider the most recent and prominent racial social movement #BlackLivesMatter, which was spearheaded by Black women activists, Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garza, two of whom identify as queer. And yet, the movement has overwhelmingly focused on the experiences of Black men with police brutality and criminalization, while often neglecting the distinct experiences that Black women, trans people, and queer people have with state sanctioned violence (Lindsey 2015). Their caution, in this context, is understandable.

*White Greek Life as the Nucleus of Hookup Culture*

Participants also noted how the massive culture of white Greek life on campus influences how white students are easily able to find potential partners to hook up with.

Victoria spoke of how she learned about elements of white hookup culture through hearing her white friends talk about their experiences. She explicitly mentioned the role that Greek life played in their sexual lives, as well as her surprise at how many men the women were able to hook up with:

> "When I talk to my um, to my Black friends versus my white friends about relationships and things, my white friends are more open to hooking up than, than my Black friends…I don't really, I don't know if it's because of race (laughs), or that's just them as people… they tell me about all the guys that they've hooked up with like that weekend and I'm just kind of like (pauses). But they're also in sororities though. I think Greek life has a huge role, um, in hookup culture at JSU for sure. Especially since the um, white frats and sororities have houses, and the Black ones don't. So I'm sure that it's much, much easier to hook up with people at a frat where you don't necessarily have an RA, you know."
>
> **-Victoria, 19, single**

Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) study this phenomenon in their exploration of inequality amongst white students in college and find that the structure of Greek life provides opportunities for hooking up, primarily for those students who are middle and upper-class and members the sororities and fraternities. This continues to bolster social and class inequality on campus through what they call the "party pathway", which emphasizes social status and privileges wealthy white students by providing them the necessary resources to easily matriculate through college. Bogle (2008) in her study of hookup culture on a large college campus also found that Greek life appeared to be at the epicenter of campus life. She discovered that "Greek members are typically at the center of social life on campus; therefore, they are frequently in situations conducive to hooking up" (61), and that white fraternity men report engaging in the most hookups, which they describe as easily accessible. Participants recalled observing similar behaviors within

these spaces, and these experiences only served to solidify their ideas about white sexuality. Amber observed:

> "The white Greek frats are like making out in the corner, I was like what? Y'all gotta go to class together, like everybody's watching you! There were like three couples just making out, I was like, this is weird. And they weren't even couples, so they just grabbed people. It was just weird."
>
> **-Amber, 20, single**

Amber's use of the word 'weird' further emphasizes how Black students view white students' sexual behavior as abnormal and the ways in which they try to distance themselves symbolically through language and physically though avoidance, which is sadly ironic considering how Black sexuality has been the one constructed as deviant. I believe that the surprise and disapproval expressed by many of the women reflects how Black women have never been able to explore their sexuality freely or openly without the threat of both formal and informal sanctions (hooks 2015; Hill Collins 2004). Because of this, Black women, especially middle-class Black women, strive to protect their sexual identities, which is largely due to the influence of respectability politics (Higginbotham 1994; White 2001). They make a point to distance themselves from what they see as amoral practices, I believe in an effort to extricate themselves from associations with this deviant sexuality.

A rather alarming association that Black women have with white Greek culture is the possibility of being drugged and sexually assaulted. Bisa indicated how this was a primary concern of hers when she went to her first white fraternity party:

> "….white Greek life. They are quite gross. They told me and my friends that our guy friend couldn't come in and I was just like, oh, no, I'm not getting drugged. Not as a freshman, not at my *first* party. *No*. I had to shut that down. I was like, okay, let's go, let's go."
>
> **-Bisa, 20, in a relationship**

Paulina also referenced this when describing how her white friends in her dorm would warn her about which parties were safe to attend and which ones weren't. She said that they would tell her "this one, like, they're racist, this one, like they're very sexist and they like drug people and stuff like that". In fact, in recent years there has been a more forceful outcry against white fraternity drugging across a growing number of universities as student victims continue to come forward about their experiences (Hartocollis and Heyward 2021). Maya, a 19-year-old in a relationship, directly references this by sharing:

> "I don't know if you've heard, but it's-there's a frat house…they just got accused of like, rape, and there's all kinds of protests going on right now… they had like a designated room for that. It was called like, the rape room or whatever. And they just got a whole bunch of exposure about that. And there were girls going to those parties. And like… they kind of expected to hook up, not get *raped*, but hook up…consent is a real issue…if consent was like, being taught more than I think that hookup culture wouldn't be as taboo… especially in high school before it's too late and they get to college and continue on there. 'Cause a lot of people cross boundaries, girls *and* guys, like it goes both ways."
>
> **-Maya, 19, in a relationship**

Maya was one of the only women to explicitly mention consent and the potential lack for it within hookup culture. Jozkowski (2017) argues that the structure of universities in relation to gender and class privilege help to facilitate sexual assault on campuses, particularly within the Greek system. However, I believe that the critical role of whiteness is also instrumental in the enforcement of these systems of power. Seabrook et. al. (2018) found in their study that men interested in fraternity membership were more likely to show a proclivity towards perpetrating sexual aggression than their counterparts uninterested in membership. And although Bisa didn't explicitly said it, I believe she was both implying that drugging would likely lead to sexual assault. Kelly, however, acknowledged the fear of sexual assault directly:

"Like they, I know rapes and stuff do happen, but I might argue that they're, not that they're less impactful, but they're at a lesser rate. Just because I feel like there's a cultural value of-'cause at white parties, hooking up, that's whatever, you literally can be at a party and somebody can go to a room and hook up. That doesn't happen at Black parties, that's not socially acceptable. Things happen after parties, but like that's not socially acceptable to happen there."

**-Kelly, 21, single**

The politics of hookup culture tend to leave women susceptible to rape or other forms of sexual assault. Scholars that study the relationship between rape culture and hookup culture tend to argue that they're mutually constitutive (Kipnis 2017; Grigoriadis 2017; Hirsch and Khan 2020), where lines of consent are blurred due to factors such as peer pressure, intoxication, and an emphasis on non-communication. Because of their lack of representation within college statistics on rates of sexual assault due to low reporting, Black women's experiences are rarely given attention. However, they are the most likely to be sexually assaulted, and yet the least likely to be believed; according to the National Center on Violence Against Women in the Black community, 35% of Black women have experienced some form of sexual violence in their lives, and according to the Institute for Women's Policy Research (Barlow 2020), more than 20 percent of Black women experience rape in their lifetimes, which is a higher share than among women overall. But they are much less likely to seek help from law enforcement; for every Black woman who reports rape, 15 do not. Consider the #MeToo Movement; although created by Black woman activist Tarana Burke, it's been portrayed in the media as focused on the sexual victimization of middle-to-upper class celebrity white women (Tambe 2018). Black women are aware of how they're left out of these larger conversations regarding gender and victimization, and I think make a point to be mindful of this when navigating

potentially dangerous situations due to the likelihood of not being believed, or even
listened to, if something were to happen.

<u>*An Absence of Racial Allegiance*</u>

White students' approach to hooking up was also discussed in reference to a lack
of obligation and responsibility for each other's' safety and security. For example,
participants mentioned observing the significant role of alcohol in the social scene of the
white community and its potential for facilitating risky situations. Some of the women
who had attended white Greek fraternity parties revealed that part of the reason they went
was to take advantage of the free alcohol, but that the white students seemed to take this
aspect of the partying a step too far:

> "They went out on Tuesday nights, Wednesday nights, Thursday nights,
> and it was just madness! (laughs)….I remember this one Wednesday, one
> of our suite mates got carried in by a group of people she didn't know
> from the bar. Like she was carried *in*…the RA is asking me and my
> roommate like, "You know, do you know where she went?" We're
> standing there in pjs and bonnets. We're like no. (laughs). Like, it's
> *Wednesday*. Do I look like I know?"
> **-Susanne, 19, single**

This alarming story of a white woman being so drunk that she had to be carried
into her dorm by people she did not know wasn't the only shocking account that I heard
about white students and their excessive alcohol consumption:

> "The culture is different. And just like, the way you move, and like, go
> about like, just like life…it's late at night, I'm looking back over my
> shoulder 'cause like, that's what you do when it's late at night. You always
> gotta be aware of your surroundings. And they'll be passed out drunk… I
> remember one year they were tryna carry her and I was like, get in my car
> like, I'll drive her because it's just like, to me, *nobody* should be out that
> late at night, that drunk and then your friends are drunk tryna take care of
> you like, it's just a different culture that like everybody was raised in. So
> it's like, it's really draining being around them."
> **-Elena, 21, single**

While she mentioned later in the interview that two people within the Black community on campus may hook up after an event or party while they're drunk, the hookup is usually initiated through social media or text, not in person. The two people are already familiar with each other and have probably been talking for some time. She assured me that Black students do get drunk-but they don't get drunk *in order to* initiate a hookup. When asked what a hook up was, the women rarely mentioned alcohol in their definitions. This deviates largely from literature on white students' experiences that hookups typically involve alcohol (Wade 2017; Bogle 2008; Freitas 2013). For Elena, having to expend energy to cope with these cultural differences was exhausting to her as a Black woman. Lea, a single 19-year-old, also mentioned how her observation of Greek Town's party scene in reference to the publicly overt drug and alcohol consumption caused her to avoid them. She said:

> "But you know, we're not sitting over here popping pills, and doing all that, so I just feel, like, safer. Honestly, I do feel safer, because at the end of the day, I know that-well I don't know-but I feel that, you know, they'd [Black community] try to protect me more than they would 'cause over in Greektown it just looks like a free for all, like everybody-you're responsible for yourself."
>
> **-Lea, 19, single**

Lea echoed others' thoughts about the issue of safety, and how the white community just doesn't seem as invested in concern for others' well-being. I believe this goes back to what participants often referred to as the 'carefree' nature of white people and their general lack of concern for safety due in part to their racial privilege. Elena provides her own explanation as to what accounts for these differences between how white students approach social life on campus differently:

> "Um, I just don't think they have, they were raised with like, as close knit, like loyalty…I learnt that in high school, they don't have loyalty, like,

loyalty is not something that they were like brought up against. It's just like *them* and like, you take what you can get… And then like, they never had that community like, 'cause it's just white people. They never-it's no sense of loyalty. It's no sense of like, we in this together, I'm not gonna like do you bad…"

**-Elena, 21, single**

Remember that the white spatial imaginary serves as "an engine of self-interest", while the Black spatial imaginary focuses on "democratic practices" and "the collective good" (Lipsitz 2011). Because the institutionalization of whiteness was created through an individualistic mindset of control and dominance, the white community lacks a sense of responsibility and obligation to one another due to unearned advantages and social privileges (Johnson 2005). There's no need for racial allegiance to one another because their racial identity hasn't been used to restrict access to resources in the way that is has for Black people. Thus, loyalty isn't an emphasized value in the white community, and this impacts their approach to social relationships, including sexual ones. Hence, the white student population on campus reflects elements of a white spatial imaginary. Kelly sums up this idea best:

> "It's a culture difference, but it's also respect difference, because the thing is, we all, we learn so much about white culture and we can respect that, but when it comes to Black culture or any other culture that's not white, it's such an exotic thing, and I don't want it to be. because it's like I have to see the value in white people every day or else I don't survive. I, and I'll say that again. I have to see the value in white people every day or I won't survive."

**-Kelly, 21, single**

In order to deal with the heaviness of gendered racism, Kelly *wants* to humanize white people as individuals, rather than to view them as a part of the racist system that oppresses her. She only wishes that Black people could get the same treatment in return; but because they don't, this is how the white spatial imaginary continues to be

reproduced and reinforced. Lipsitz (2011) asserts that whiteness is "not so much a color as a condition…yet because whiteness rarely speaks its names or admits to its advantages, it requires the construction of a devalued and even demonized Blackness to be credible and legitimate" (37).

## Reaffirming White Ownership through Sexualized Misogynoir

The construction of whiteness and white supremacy within the United States is grounded in the pursuit of control and ownership of property, which has included both land and people (Harris 1993). Originally created as a form of racial identity, whiteness over time became considered a form of property that's been protected by various laws and policies. This has its origins in the domination of indigenous and Black peoples, which led to the racial establishment of property rights and the legitimation of whiteness as a racial privilege and a status property. This association became so entrenched in the sociopolitical structure of society that even after legal segregation was abolished, whiteness as property continued to operate as a barrier to effective change, which reinforced ideas of whiteness as superior and desirable (Harris 1993). These ideas continue to structure the sociopolitical landscape of American society in various ways, including within the institution of higher education. After the eradication of legal segregation, white people developed other methods in which to retain ownership over valuable land and exclude marginalized groups from being able to access and obtain them. In this way, they also controlled the desirability of space. Lipsitz (2011) speaks directly to this when discussing the white spatial imaginary: "Even more important, these sites serve to produce and sustain racial meanings: they enact a public pedagogy about who belongs where and about what makes certain spaces desirable" (15). White students

engage in actions to reaffirm ownership and control of campus and campus life, establish racial boundaries, and remind marginalized students of their inferior position within the hierarchy of the university. My participants' experiences largely reflected elements of misogynoir, or the specific prejudice and discrimination against Black women (Bailey 2010), and typically fell within three categories: alienation, fetishization, and exclusion. This had significant effects on Black women's aversion to socially interacting with white students, and in particular white men, with several of their negative experiences happening on Tinder or in what they referred to as 'Greek City'[16], where the white Greek organizations are housed. They attributed this racially tense campus environment to the Midwestern locale of the university, and associated whiteness in this space with racial and political conservatism. The following sections explore how acts of misogynoir against Black women are used to reassert control and dominance over campus space, and as an extension, the social behavior of marginalized students. These actions emphasize to Black students that they should remain in their subordinate place in the racial hierarchy of campus; and if they do choose to transgress these spaces, they're expected to behave in ways that are beneficial to whiteness.

*Navigating Whiteness in the Midwest*

The women in my study expressed how encountering the overt racism at Jefferson State University, which is situated in a rural area, was a culture shock to most. While most of them grew up in predominantly white areas and had several white friends in high school, they remarked how the white students at Jefferson State University were particularly unwelcoming, and at times outright hostile. This was disconcerting to those

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[16] This is a pseudonym.

who came from areas where racial diversity and integration were a normalized aspect of their environment; upon attending JSU, they were surprised at the alienation and obscurity that they felt on and off campus. They were also shocked by the boldly racist way in which white men spoke to and treated them, especially on dating applications such as Tinder (which in reality is primarily used for hookups rather than dating). The application was largely framed as a white male dominated space where the men either rarely matched with them or would send them racially objectifying messages, and at times outright racial slurs. Kelly, a 21-year-old senior, spoke angrily about her encounters with white men. She said:

> "I pull up my Tinder in jest, but I'm serious, like, I get messages like,
> 'I've never been with a Black girl before', 'what is Black pussy like', just
> very blatant messages that are just very inappropriate...So I had the
> privilege of growing up upper middle class, middle class, and so like, I
> was shielded from that. And then I got here, it didn't matter what class I
> was, 'cause I was just Black in [the Midwest]...the racism in [the Midwest]
> is just too much."
>                                                                    **-Kelly, 21, single**

Kelly's point about being raised middle-class as a protective mechanism of sorts was quite poignant and similar to my own experiences growing up. As I learned more about the intersections of race and class during graduate school, I felt as though I was safeguarded from and ignorant of the overtly racist actions that lower income Black people often face and experience. Dow (2019) makes the argument that upper-middle-class Black mothers use class to protect their children from unrespectable interactions and behaviors, which I believe reflects Kelly's experience in some ways. Thus, when entering environments where race is more salient than class, experiences of racism may seem especially unsettling. While this is a horrific example of unabashed sexualized racism, I became less appalled and more dismayed as, time after time, women continued to share

similar interactions they've had with white men on Tinder, one of the central reasons

many of them chose to avoid the application altogether. Other women recalled being

referred to by racial slurs such as 'nigger[17]' and fetishized terms such as 'dark magic' or

'the darker the better'. They attributed these behaviors to the whiteness of JSU and the

surrounding area, as well as how white racial identity may be constructed differently in

the Midwest, hence Kelly's emphasis on the racism being 'just too much'. As I was

listening to her account, I couldn't help but think about how Black women continue to be

dehumanized through society's focus on their body parts, rather than their humanity (Hill

Collins 2004). This can be traced to the objectification and commodification of Black

women's bodies in the focus on their capability to produce labor, including the

reproduction of more slaves (Haley 2016). Terry, a single 21-year-old, also spoke directly

to the Midwestern culture of the university:

> "**Terry:** But like, for some odd reason, the type of whiteness here is just
> different. They don't find me beautiful.
> **Jen:** Why here, do you think?
> **Terry:** I think it's like Midwest culture? Like, the politics of like, race is
> so like different than what is like, talked about in New York or LA. I feel
> like they see us like, literally the people to blame for like the downfall of
> the economy, you know what I mean? Like mooch off the government,
> like we're animals. I think that is a perception a lot of Midwest white
> people here-or probably just whiteness in general…And here, like, they
> love a *culture* of Blackness but they *hate* Black people."
> **-Terry, 21, single**

Terry directly referenced other places perceived as diverse and integrative to

emphasize the overtly racist nature of the Midwest and the way in which whiteness

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[17] I intentionally do not censor these racial epithets because I believe in accurately and authentically portraying my participants' narratives as they were told to me. An element of counter-storytelling is to uncover the silenced narratives of racially marginalized groups (Delgado and Stefancic 2017); I use this conceptual approach to to disrupt the historical suppression of Black women's voices and experiences, which I staunchly refuse to endorse.

operates differently in this region. Her perspective that Midwestern culture has an investment in the perceived legitimacy of racial stereotypes points back to my brief discussion on the dehumanization of Black people, and how actions such as cultural appropriation (which is rarely recognized as a symbolically violent racial issue) further the degradation of Blackness by focusing on the consumption of its provocative cultural aspects rather than the people involved (Jackson 2021). This manifestation of contempt towards Black people is so deeply entrenched in the politics of race and space that white students navigate campus with a complete disregard for Black students as though they don't even exist. Cassie, a 19-year-old in a relationship, reflects on this point:

> "**Cassie:** And it's not like I don't know how to be around white
> people…but the white people at my high school…have been very different
> from the white people here. Like I said, I'm from the East Coast.
> **Jen:** Hm. How are they different?
> **Cassie:** Here…my first day, I went up to go meet with my friend…I
> walked into her lounge. I said, 'Hi', there's a bunch of white people. I said
> hi to everyone-they *stared*. Just (long pause)-nobody responded. Nothing.
> They stared at me until I walked away…because that's just how the white
> people here are."
>
> **-Cassie, 19, in a
> relationship**

This serves a reminder that the university was not established to make space for Black people or other marginalized groups; in other words, they do not belong. White students make a point to clarify this through actions such as these.

*Confronting Sexualized Racism through Fetishization*

I heard numerous accounts of Black women's experiences with racial fetishization and objectification by both white men and women in various spaces on campus, particularly within the white Greek community. Many of them had an acute awareness of the difference between genuine attraction and fetishization and were critical of the white

male gaze. Black women have always been seen as objects of consumption and spectacle

(Hobson 2003); this plays out no differently within the context of the PWI. Having

attended PWIs for the entirety of my time in higher education, I resonated strongly with

some of their accounts; stories such as the one below were particularly difficult to hear,

where these actions manifested as macroaggressive gendered racism:

> "And this guy called me a nigger bitch but I didn't hear it. My friends
> heard it and like rushed me away and I said, 'no, why are you pushing me,
> like what's going on?'…'He said nigger bitch'. I said, 'oh shit'. I was
> ready to bust some ass. And looking back, I'm glad I didn't, 'cause being
> a Black woman, that just wouldn't have gone very well for me."
> **-Kelly, 21, single**

Here, we can see the materialization of gendered racism directed specifically

towards Black women. The coalescence of the words 'nigger' and 'bitch' highlights the

demoralized intersection of Blackness and womanhood. Historically, instances of racism

have been framed as merely racist, not gendered; this has contributed to the neglect of

Black women's specific experiences with racism as *women* (Davis 1983; hooks 2015).

This remains an issue within literature on the higher educational experiences of Black

students who attend PWIs, which tends to privilege Black men's issues with retention and

belonging (Patton and Ward 2016). And this sadly wasn't Kelly's only experience with

the word; she also recalled someone at a fraternity party saying, "what's the nigger doing

in here?", after which she stated, while laughing, that her and her 'woke' white friends

stole tablecloths and other various items before running out. Now while this can be

considered a comical reaction to the situation, I also frame it as an act of defiance and a

reclamation of power, and I argue that many of the women found their own ways to

disrupt and challenge gendered racism on campus.

I gave a talk about my research to a Black undergraduate women's group that focuses on discussions of Black womanhood and how to navigate a PWI, and I invited them to share their own experiences and perspectives afterwards. Finishing up, I could barely grab my pen fast enough-the women chimed in so quickly that I began furiously jotting down their responses. However, one of the first things I recall taking notes on was their aversion to interracial coupling due to the suspicion that white men's 'desires' for them were actually just fetishes. They shared:

> "And the compliments…please, calling me a chocolate goddess does NOT make me feel as good as you think."

> "You can still be racist and have a Black girlfriend."

> "Sexist men marry women all the time, racist men marry POC [people of color] all the time."

Again, these comments depict Black women's recognition and understanding of the intersections of race, gender, and desire, and how white men can retain racist ideologies while engaging in sexual or romantic relationships with Black women. And bottom line is, they ain't having it; they recognize and protect their worth as degree-seeking Black women and refuse to be treated in ways that they deem disrespectful to their identity. They demand to be appreciated for who they are, not what they represent, and refuse to engage in relationships that demean rather than uplift them.

White Greek parties were hotspots for these experiences of fetishization. These homogenous spaces are framed as exclusively white property, with their proximity to campus further solidifying their ownership of campus. Paulina points out that due to the history of the school, the impact of wealth and "catering to white men who were rich" caused tangible differences between the white and Black fraternities. Within the literature

on social life at predominantly white institutions, white fraternities are often discussed in relation to how they reproduce and perpetuate white supremacy by engaging in racist behaviors, establishing racial boundaries on campus through self-segregation, and using racial stereotypes to dissociate themselves from Black and other marginalized students (Joyce and Cawthon 2017). However, little attention is paid to racist actions directed towards Black women that are gendered *and* sexualized, and how these actions work to reinforce sexualized controlling images of Black women such as the jezebel (Hill Collins 2004). The Black women in my study often attended one party and never returned. Jada, a single 21-year-old, explained why she had no intentions of going back:

> "Freshman year for my 18th birthday I was so gung ho…I didn't even go with my white friends, I went with my sister and some of her friends….and we didn't even step foot in the frat house. They see us on the sidewalk and they're like, "hey Black girls, y'all wanna twerk for us?" And we turned, we about-faced so quick. And so we're walking away, and there's like…girls on the porch, [who] were like, "Yeah, like, come twerk for us, come twerk for us". And it's just like, absolutely not…It's like, A, I don't perform for men. And B, I'm not gonna perform for white men under the fact that you think because I'm Black, I would do this for you. And I think that's disgusting."
>
> **-Jada, 21, single**

"Twerking" is a form of sexually provocative dancing within Black culture that has its origins in African dancing (Toth 2017). While it's gained popularity in non-Black communities within the last decade, it is still often used to stereotype and categorize Black women as promiscuous even though it also continues to be used as a way to sexually fetishize them. Historically, white people have had a particularly gross fascination with the Black female body, with an emphasis on the buttocks as a signifier of deviant sexuality (Hobson 2003). Saartijie Baartman, an African woman born and enslaved in the 19th century, was forced to be an exhibition in London for the perceived

abnormality of her large buttocks, where white patrons were allowed to observe and touch her. After her death, her genitalia were dissected, studied, and compared to those of primates, after which they were preserved and displayed in a natural history museum, where they remained until 1974. Thereon, she represented the abnormality of Black female bodies and as an extension, sexual deviance. Rapper Nicki Minaj has been very vocal about the racist double-standards in popular culture, discussing her choice to flaunt her large buttocks in comparison to white models on magazine covers wearing revealing bathing suits. While she's perceived as freakish and perverse, white women are perceived as virtuous and angelic. Because twerking emphasizes hip and butt movements, it's used by white society as another manifestation of the depravity of Black female sexuality. Kelly also spoke about her avoidance of white Greek parties because of constant requests to twerk:

> "But walking up to Tims and stuff, Tim and Roberts and Jareds…like ooh, Kelly, stepping out your comfort zone. Um, 'come with us to the frat so you can twerk', things like that…and they're like [in high pitched voice], 'oh my god, you can twerk, oh my god you have to come out with us again, oh my god, you gotta come back, you dance so well', blah blah blah....'you're so pretty for a Black girl'…. Just like, when I used to go out to the frats and stuff, like 'oh, her ass is so fat', or 'oh, like you can twerk so well', just shit like that."
> 
> **-Kelly, 21, single**

These accounts support the argument that if Black women want to be in these spaces, they must behave in ways that uphold white perceptions of stereotypical Black femininity. While historically they were able to consume these stereotyped images through minstrel shows (Sewell 2013), within our contemporary technology-driven society they're now able to do so from the comfort of their homes via social media and reality television. Black women's roles in these spaces are that of 'performers', and their

value lies in being a spectacle for white people's entertainment. These racist actions are another way of keeping Black women in their 'place'. Likely as a way to navigate these uncomfortable situations, Amber attributed these actions to ignorance rather than intentional racism:

"I've gone to Greek parties with like, like Greek Town and white men have looked at me like, "well, why are you here?" Like, it's very much so like, you can feel it like, they don't want me, you know (laughs)… It was subliminal stuff that was like, racist? But…they [white women] didn't know it was racist. Like, can you teach me how to twerk?"
**-Amber, 20, single**

To be fair, I do think some of these white women are well-meaning, and that they're unaware of how their actions may be perceived, especially while intoxicated. I have personally experienced them touching and grabbing my natural hair in a social space, all the while commenting exaggeratedly on my beauty and professing their jealousy at how thick and full my twist-out was. While their intentions were likely good, this did not lessen the impact of feeling like an exotic pet in a zoo, or in Amber's case, being expected to perform or instruct at a moment's notice. These actions not only serve as a reaffirmation that white women are active participants in the objectification of Black women, but also that they benefit from it. Remember that white female sexuality was constructed as normal through the construction of Black female sexuality as deviant, abnormal, and depraved (Somerville 2000; Gilman 1985). So, while Amber would likely be racially stereotyped as ghetto, ratchet[18], or promiscuous for twerking, white women have been free to engage in this form of dance while still being able to retain a wholesome identity. Recall how white music artist Miley Cyrus was able to capitalize off

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[18] A colloquial term originated in Black culture that means ghetto, trashy, nasty, or morally reprehensible, and is generally used in reference to Black women.

her twerking phase in the early 2010s, and then was welcomed back into the country music scene with open arms while simultaneously criticizing the lewdness of hip-hop from which she had benefited. Her white privilege allowed her to easily shed her promiscuous image in a way that Black women have not been able to. Situations like these illustrate how serious an issue cultural appropriation is in how it affects the lived experiences of every day Black women.

*Inhibiting Access to White Spaces through Ostracism*

While not all participants recalled overt acts of gendered racism or fetishization, many spoke of generally feeling unwanted or alienated in white Greek spaces by being ignored, stared at, or questioned. This was another mechanism used by white students to indicate to Black students where they do not belong, as well as to control and protect the homogeneity of the space (Kiesling 2001). Even when participants attended with white friends, their presence was still questioned by other white students. Jenae, a 20-year-old in a relationship, shared:

> "And so I remember, um, one of her [a white friend] friends saying, 'oh, who's the Black girl?' She's like, 'oh, this is my friend…it was a sorority party, so they're basically trying to figure out who did I come with? Where did I come from? I honestly think they were like too drunk to really pay me any attention. But the few that did like, come over there or come towards us kind of…looked at me weird or…I feel like my white friend was taking property over me kinda? Like making it obvious I was there with her and not just there at the party. So…nah, I did not go back (laughs). I never went to another one."
>
> **-Jenae, 20, in a relationship**

When asked why she thought this was her experience, she attributed these behaviors to the notable social status of white Greek organizations on campus. These organizations have historically held a significant level of power and privilege on predominantly white campuses, which allows them to control and regulate spaces and

avoid accountability for their actions (Ray 2013; Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). Kelly

echoed Jenae's sentiment of having to be claimed by a white student (how sardonic

considering the history of enslavement, right?), stating:

> "Mm mm, cause if you're not, if you don't have white people around you,
> you're just gonna get objectified…but if you don't have white friends with
> you when you go, a group of Black girls you're just gonna get 'can you
> twerk for me, can you do this, da da da', you're just gonna be objectified,
> and you may not even get in."
>
> **-Kelly, 21, single**

This idea of using white friends or acquaintances as a racial social buffer

highlights the importance that accessibility holds in these spaces, as well as who has the

authority to determine it.  Other women discussed these feelings of exclusion within these

spaces as well:

> "Um, then we walked past, I can't remember what the name is, but it's one
> of the racist ones, and we walked past them…we went up to the door
> 'cause we thought the party was going on and they were like, 'what are
> you doing? Like literally, what are you doing?' And we're like, 'we came
> to party'. They're like, 'well it's over, so'...and they were just rude. But
> yeah."
>
> **-Paulina, 19, single**

Rather than being questioned like other women described, she and her friends

were outright restricted from entering the space. In the end, though, this may have been

for the best, considering what Cassie shared:

> "Yeah, I've only been twice. And I mean, they let me in because I'm a girl.
> But you could tell I'm not *their* type of girl. And like, the vibe is just very
> clear. Because say, say we want to get drinks or something. They will
> serve white girls before me. Even if I came with those white girls, they
> will give them their little alcohol first…even if I'm standing there at the
> front, I remember it was just like the girls all around me. But it took me
> like five minutes to get a drink. And I was right at the front. I was posted
> and I was short and I was peeking over the thing".
>
> **-Cassie, 19, in a relationship**

Kina, a 20-year-old in a relationship, however, welcomed the invisibility in these spaces because it allowed her to focus on hanging out with her white friends rather than networking and socializing like she did at the Black Greek parties. Those Black women who *were* welcomed into these spaces generally served a purpose for the white students there; Jada spoke of trying to warn her Black roommate of the exploitation she was experiencing in her attempts to be seen as acceptable to the white community:

> "My roommate at the time…she was talking about how like, how she would go to the frat all the time. And she loved going to the white frats. But…her positive experience was also rooted in this thing about like performance…she's like "yeah, I go to the frats, the frat boys love me, they bring me drinks. They do this for me. They love me…yeah, but they also like me 'cause I know how to roll their blunts." And I'm like, well, okay. It's just like, you are only good enough for them when you *perform* for them."
>
> **-Jada, 21, single**

Jada was acutely aware of the function that Black people, especially Black women, are expected to fulfill in these spaces, and displayed some judgment towards her roommate for her refusal to see her own exploitation, intentional or not. Black students who were seen as 'betraying' the Black student community by joining white Greek organizations or generally not acknowledging their 'Blackness' were judged harshly by the women and considered 'white-washed'. To them, turning your back on a racial community that is already perceived as inferior to obtain white approval is a sign of treachery. While Terry asserted that she didn't seek white approval by any means, she did make an attempt to gain attention at a white Greek party by 'performing stereotypical Blackness', which had surprisingly unsuccessful results:

> "'Cause I wore like, um, high waisted booty shorts and like this crop top. And I was like, I don't know, trying to dance but like, no one, like no white man like approached me…and I would do like everything that was like, quote, unquote, like Black, like, try to twerk so like, people would

like, I would like attract people to me. But like, that didn't happen…like white men, just I feel like I'm not like, even attractive. They don't even look at me, you know what I mean? Like I'm like, a fucking dust (laughs), like, they just walk through me."

**-Terry, 21, single**

Even when *trying* to engage in stereotypically Black behavior, Terry's presence still went unacknowledged. Her use of the word 'dust', and this idea of literally being 'walked through' illustrates just how invisibly small and insignificant she must have felt in that space. She discussed in detail how her darker complected skin and emphasis on natural beauty via being makeup-less and sporting short natural hair isn't considered attractive even within the Black community, let alone to white men or women. She also made a point to share her observation that queer white women seemed to date Black women, particularly those with darker complected skin, because of their perception as 'masculine', which illustrates the types of fetishization that Black queer women may experience within interracial interactions. The fetishization and objectification of Black queer women is prominent but often ignored and dismissed. The New Jersey 4, a group of gay Black women who were sexually harassed and attacked by a heterosexual Black man and then incarcerated for several years after defending themselves, shows us how perceptions of Black queerness can have an impact on Black LGBTQ folks within the criminal justice system (Richie 2012). Their treatment in the media as masculine, dangerous, and aggressive overshadowed their experiences of homophobic victimization and justified the violent actions enacted against them by the perpetrator. Due to issues of homophobia within the Black community and the exclusion of Black LGBTQ folks from the category of Blackness due to the association of homosexuality with whiteness (Somerville 2000; Hill Collins 2004), these narratives are rarely included in social and

academic discussions of racial issues. But these perspectives can give us insight into how the intersection of sexual orientation adds another layer of experience that affects Black students' experiences with dating and sex.

I don't include Black women's experiences with the white student population to use white hookup culture as a point of comparison; my intention is to be critical of the role of whiteness in the structure of the university to have a better understanding of how it shapes the romantic and sexual experiences of Black women. Lipsitz's (2011) assertion that "racialized space gives whites privileged access to opportunities for social inclusion and upward mobility…at the same time, it imposes unfair and unjust forms of exploitation and exclusion on aggrieved communities of color" (6) gives us a clearer understanding of the function of the exploitation and exclusion of Black women in these spaces.

## Structures of Desire in Cultivating Interracial Uninterest

My last section focuses on Black women's general aversion to both dating and hooking up with white men and women, specifically those on Jefferson State University's campus. This antipathy stems from various social, cultural, and physical factors that cause the women to view interracial relationships as undesirable, such as their awareness of the subordination of Black femininity by white men and women historically, association of Midwestern whiteness with political and racial conservatism, and belief that having to navigate racially cultural differences would be emotionally and mentally draining. I situate the broader structure of hookup culture on campus as a 'sexual field', which refers to the ways in which the social construction of erotic desire reconfigures power relations within a particular social setting (Green 2008). There are three aspects to

this concept: structures of desire, which focuses on the idea of an erotic habitus where sexual categories revolve around historically constructed classifications of race, class, and gender; tiers of desirability, where a hegemonic currency of erotic capital is expressed in social relations that confer status upon sexual actors who are situated differently within the field's sexual hierarchy; and distribution of erotic capital, which indicates how sexual sociality is shaped by the distribution of erotic capital , or sexual resources (Green 2008). Green uses this concept to explore how Black gay men navigate desirability related to race, gender expression, and sexual orientation in an urban sexual field where only certain *kinds* of Black gay men are considered desirable, causing them to choose to either conform or challenge these kinds of sexual capital. Within the context of this theme, I focus on the specific element of 'structures of desire' to analyze how historical constructions of racial desirability affect how Black women and white people view one another.

Being from predominantly white areas, many of the women insisted they were open to interracial relationships and had in fact dated and/or hooked up with them, stressing that ultimately, personality was more important to them than race. However, the racist nature of the university deterred many from wanting to engage in romantic or sexual interactions with the white student population and caused them to claim that if they *were* to date or hook up with a white person, it wouldn't be at Jefferson University. As a result, many of them preferred to date or hook up intraracially. While literature on this topic tends to frame Black femininity as the one seen as historically undesirable, which admittedly is factual, I argue that Black women are erotic actors within their own right and employ agency by crafting high criteria for attractiveness related to the

treatment and respect of Black women and Black culture in addition to dictating which forms of whiteness they consider appealing. Analyzing these narratives in this way challenges the social positioning of Black women as objects of desire, and instead situates them as agentic subjects formulating their own definitions of desirability.

*Reverting the White Male Gaze through Oppositional Spectatorship*

When asked if they would date or hook up with a white man or woman, many of the women discussed how it had to be a *specific* kind of white person that they would be willing to associate with. This was largely framed in terms of how racially conscious an individual is and whether this consciousness is performative or authentic. I argue that this 'wokeness', or awareness of social issues, was considered an attractive feature to the women because it indicates that their appreciation of Black women's beauty and respect for Black culture is genuine rather than fetishistic. As such, Black women operate as 'Black female spectators' who use their own critical gaze of whiteness to determine desirability as a site of resistance to the white 'male gaze' that's dictated Black women's sexuality as both grotesque and hypersexual (Snow 1989; hooks 1992). Brianna described this 'woke' form of whiteness in quite an amusing way:

> "**Brianna:** So then the Black women [on Twitter] started talking about wanting a white-the white men. And then some Black women say, 'the seasoned white man'. Like white men that are 'seasoned'.
> **Jen:** (laughs) 'Seasoned'? What does that *mean*?
> **Brianna:** "Like do you know who Travis Kelce is? Seasoned. Exactly. Exactly."
> **-Brianna, 18, single**

'Seasoned' is a Black colloquial slang term that refers to 'adding flavor' to someone's identity via their legitimate appreciation of another racial culture that's not based in imitation or appropriation. I myself have heard of and used the term 'spicy' to

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refer to this type of whiteness-it's that kind of thing where you know it when you see it. Also, just to clarify, Travis Kelce is the Kansas City Chiefs' football team's tight end and is currently dating a Black woman that he's been with for several years. He's often considered alluring amongst Black women for his looks, character, and 'swagger', or stylish confidence. Other white male celebrities considered 'seasoned' or 'spicy' are actor Chris Evans and rapper Jack Harlow. Elena gave her own example of someone that she considers fits this description:

> "Yeah, so no, it's just like, are they there? Are they there mentally? Like, I be looking at Cameron off of Love is Blind, like he's there, like when he defended her, like, 'stop touching her hair'. Like he's there. But are the rest of them there? Are they ready to defend to their parents and like tell their parents like, 'hey, I'm in love with this Black girl, I'm bringing her home'. And I don't think most of them are there."
> **-Elena, 21, single**

Although I've never seen the reality TV show Love is Blind, which is essentially a dating competition, I recall the buzz about this particular interracial couple due to the rareness of seeing Black women and white men together (Hill Collins 2004). Elena's comment reflects what I heard many of the women express: if they were to date white men, they would want them prepared to be protective and prideful of them as Black women specifically, rather than hesitant or reluctant to defend their relationship to others because of the stigma attached to interracial dating (Childs 2005). And there's a difference between a genuine attraction to Black women rather than a trendy one; Cassie mentioned how a white male student on campus was primarily interested in dating a Black girl just to say that he had done so, rather than having a genuine desire to. He had also made attempts to demonstrate his alleged integration into the Black student community by saying 'nigga' around them, which Cassie made clear was unacceptable

by prohibiting him from saying it around her. Other discussions around unattractive

forms of whiteness were often in reference to white Midwest culture and online dating:

> "I don't really have like a racial preference, but sometimes I do feel more
> wary of like white men. Just because sometimes I'm like, I don't know, I
> feel like a more violent demographic…and I just don't really want to be
> around that…'cause sometimes, you know, there'll be profiles that are
> more *country.* And, I feel like sometimes, that's when I get more wary,
> like I don't think I should put myself in a situation, because…country
> people, at least in [the Midwest], they're not very supportive of Black
> issues or matters."
>
> **-Mimi, 19, single**

Mimi shares how her association of white country life with racial conservatism is

a deterrent for her to date at JSU; this distaste was shared by Victoria, who described

images that she's come across on Tinder:

> "Tinder is frustrating in [the Midwest], because I just get a bunch of white
> guys with dead deer in their pictures….yeah, it's bad… like I don't want to
> see that (laughs). I immediately swipe left, like you can be the most
> attractive guy, you can be *Harry Styles*, but if you have a dead deer in
> your-*no!* You're still left."
>
> **-Victoria, 19, single**

When discussing Tinder, many of the women mentioned how white men's

profiles often contained images of hunted, dead animals, and large weapons such as guns,

attributing this to the rurality of the surrounding areas around JSU, hence Mimi's use of

the word 'country'. These images were perceived as scary and threatening to the women

and caused them to view white men in this environment as being dangerous, violent, and

aggressive, which made them feel unsafe pursuing interactions with them. I found this to

be significant considering that white men seldom have threatening racial stereotypes

attached to them, despite the history of white supremacy being constructed through

violence and domination (Anderson 2017). This affirms Black women as occupiers of a

critical gaze, wherein these images are perceived as repugnant, disturbing, and associated

with an undesirable whiteness. Brianna furthers this point, expressing her wariness of

white students' racial attitudes on campus:

> "I'm not particular on any race when it comes to dating. But it's just like, with white males and, and females- but more males on this campus. I don't know if they're, like racist, or they say the n-word. And kind of makes me not want to talk to any of the whites here as, as a whole."
>
> **-Brianna, 18, single**

Although Brianna, who identifies as bisexual, emphasizes her perspective on

white men's penchant for racism, she also included white women in her commentary on

dating interracially on campus. She shared that although she had dated a white girl in her

exploration of sexuality in high school, due to the stereotyping of campus as deeply

racist, she had no interest in either gender. To Jenae, the sight of a Black woman with a

white man is so ludicrous that:

> "White man and a Black woman (pause). I don't know, first thing people assume is like, 'oh, that's her sugar daddy'. That's her money maker, like (laughs). I don't really think Black women-there are some Black women who are attracted to white men, but how many would *that* be? It wouldn't be quite a lot, I would assume."
>
> **-Jenae, 20, in a relationship**

Again, due to the rarity of seeing the coupling of Black women and white men,

Jenae claims that most probably assume this interracial pairing is based on a monetary

relationship due to the unlikelihood that Black women have a genuine interest in white

men. What I found interesting about her comment was that she didn't frame it as white

men not desiring Black women, but rather Black women not being attracted to white

men. This reasserts Black women as oppositional spectators with their own

interpretations of attractiveness. The next subsection, though, does explore the historical

subordination of Black femininity by white people, and the effect this has had on how

Black women view them, as well as their selves.

While participants situated themselves as agentic subjects in their construction of desire and attractiveness, they also addressed the historical phenomenon of white men viewing Black women and Black femininity as undesirable and unattractive due to the Eurocentric standard of beauty that exists within the U.S., and arguably, around the world (Hunter 2005). hooks (2015) argues that white men have deemed Black women as both hypersexual and unattractive since slavery, while at the same time justifying their sexually violent treatment of them. Black women, particularly those of a darker skin tone, also tend to be masculinized within the context of the construction of feminine beauty (Haley 2016). Lily spoke of growing up in a predominantly white neighborhood and that she "never thought I was beautiful. I thought I was the ugliest piece of shit stuck on the road." This highlights how embedded the denigration of Black femininity is within U.S. society's construction of beauty, and how Black girls come to internalize these ideas (Morris 2014). Harry speaks to this phenomenon, but mentions that it's not only white men who perceive Black women as unattractive:

> "Um, there's just a bunch of stereotypes and like, bad things said about us everywhere. So people believe it. Um, yeah, some people or some Black girls don't think white guys want them and then Black guys, who gon' say that they don't want Black girls. Asian guys don't really talk to us. Yeah, stuff like that. It's just (pause), there's nothing really going on for us."
>
> **-Harry, 21, single**

Harry points to stereotypes as the reason that white men, and others, perceive Black women as undesirable. This leaves Black women with limited pools for dating and hooking up in college. Schoepflin's (2009) study on students' views of interracial dating at a predominantly white university revealed that Black women generally expressed disinterest or discomfort in white men largely *because* of the assumption that white men

aren't attracted to Black women.   Bisa, who was biracial, spoke at length about how brown and dark-skinned Black men are the ones most likely to be attracted to and try to date or hook up with her, mentioning that fetishization of lighter skin is likely the cause (Hunter 2005). Because of this, she was a bit surprised at the lack of interest from white men:

> "I don't think I've-there's probably been two or three white boys like, "oh my gosh, you're so beautiful, I would love to take you out'-probably three on one hand. In my twenty years of living. So-I just, I'm a little confused myself, I thought I was cute, I guess not to everybody, just, just Black men."
>
> **-Bisa, 20, single**

Her assertion that she 'thought she was cute' until she realized that white men weren't interested in her physically points to how white men have been given the power and privilege to determine who and what is considered desirable; they've historically been the ones in control of shaping structures of desire (Green 2008). Jada speaks directly to this white male gaze:

> "But if I see a Black girl with a white man, I'm like, 'you go girl'. 'You get it'. And like, that's so problematic! It's so like-like I'm thinking about it and it like disgusts me. Like, like white men are the prize. You go higher in your social standing…that's like another thing…like now we're-our beauty is validated as if white men get to determine beauty."
>
> **-Jada, 21, single**

Jada had a self-realization of how her celebration of Black women with white men solidifies the idea that white men are considered a high 'prize' because of their status in society and are the ones who have the privilege and authority to determine what's considered beauty. This points to how structures of desire at times are unwittingly and unintentionally internalized and perpetuated by Black women, even as they challenge the white male gaze and refuse to conform to society's standards of beauty. Victoria

speaks about how her aversion to interracial dating on Jefferson University's campus is

driven by suspicions that white men are simply fetishizing her, which echoes the previous

section on how Black women are wary of white women who don't have a genuine

appreciation for Black women:

> "But I find that (pause)-Tinder, um, in terms of race relations, I guess
> is...Black men find me more attractive than white men do, right? Um, and
> there's all this fear I have of being fetishized and, you know, somebody
> displaying jungle fev-*whatever*...I don't know if the white guy that I
> swiped right on, if we're going to match because I don't know if he finds
> me attractive. And if he finds me attractive, is it because he has a fetish?
> Or he's like, experimenting or something? I don't know."
> **-Victoria, 19, single**

Many of the women spoke to this apprehension, particularly in reference to the

dating application Tinder, where many of them experienced objectifying and fetishistic

comments.  Childs (2005) discusses how the contemporary structure of college life is

highly segregated by race, which inhibits possible interracial interactions. I argue that this

is made even more prominent by the locale of the university and impacts how Black

women view, and ultimately avoid, whiteness. McClintock & Murry (2010) also study

the impact of race on sex and dating at a predominantly white university, finding that

Black women are less likely to engage or be interested in interracial hookups, dates, and

romantic relationships, and more likely to engage in these same interactions intraracially,

which the author speculates is caused by the socially isolated nature of Black students.

Again, scholars tend to put the onus on Black students as the ones who self-segregate,

while I argue that white students' desire to retain the homogeneity of their spaces causes

them to engage in behaviors that compel Black students to avoid them.

*Perceived Black Inauthenticity as an Indication of Interracial Interest*

Those Black women who weren't deemed 'stereotypically Black' or 'Black enough' were assumed as having dominant interest in dating or hook up interracially, which is perceived as a denial of their race (Hunter 2005). This didn't only apply to lighter-skinned or bi-racial women, who face some prejudice within the Black community, but also those who didn't speak or act in ways that were deemed by others to reflect traits of Blackness. Within the Black community, and amongst Black men in particular, Black women who primarily date white men are seen as 'race traitors' (Hill Collins 2004). Lily spoke to her own experience with these stereotypes:

> "I mean, everyone around me will tell you-this is a pet peeve of mine actually, everyone around me will say that I only like white people, white guys. Which is completely false. It bugs me like crazy…Because, because it kind of goes into that package of, oh Lily, you're not Black enough. Oh Lily, you only like white guys. It's like, that's not *true*."
> **-Lily, junior, 20**

Lily was adamant that she was open to all races, but because of her interest in stereotypically 'non-Black' things like yoga, as well as the way in which she speaks, others often make comments that she's only interested in interracial dating. She spoke in frustration about her Blackness constantly being questioned and insisted that she wasn't any less Black or any less interested in Black men just because she had unique interests. Victoria also spoke openly about being called an Oreo (racially Black on the outside but culturally white on the inside) for much of her life, and primarily from Black people at that. She described this as hurtful, especially coming from her peers, and criticized how the terms of Blackness can be rigid at times. She also stated that although she mostly dated white men growing up, it was because of her environment and lack of options, not preference.

Kina explained that although white men wouldn't approach her in person, she was more likely to be addressed on Tinder because of her lighter-skinned complexion and the perception by others, including her Black friends, that she's not entirely Black:

> "I'm gonna say this, and I hate that this is a thing, but like, I don't necessarily look Black or 100% Black, which I feel like, it's part of the reason why…some white guys will say something to me, because I don't necessarily look like I'm 100% or even Black. That's maybe why they approach me on Tinder. But they don't approach me in person. Not usually…My friends make fun of me all the time. Like you're not fully black, like you're white. Now, I'm white because I talk a certain way or I look a certain way…?"
>
> **-Kina, sophomore, 19**

Coming from a predominantly white background with primarily white friends, Kina spoke to how it wasn't only her complexion, but also the way in which she spoke that caused her friends to question her Blackness. However, she had no interest in dating or hooking up with white men, and actually spoke about how the Black community on campus was influential in the exploration of her Black identity and connection with Black culture, of which she was appreciative.  Mimi, who was biracial, stated that her white friends were the most likely to get approached by men, and that Black women who got approached by white men were typically viewed as 'less Black':

> "Like I'd say the only kind of girls that are like, not white and get approached…I don't know how to say it nicely, I guess. Kind of whitewashed, like they don't really acknowledge their race that much."
>
> **-Mimi, 19, single**

Mimi was specifically speaking about Black women who join historically white sororities, fitting a certain image that is appealing to white men, which is a perceived dissociation from Blackness and seen as undesirable. This policing of Black authenticity is significant because of the historical rejection of Blackness as inferior, and so when those who are Black or part Black choose to identify with another race, they are seen as

racial traitors (Nguyen and Anthony 2014). These discussions are critical in better understanding how the racial parameters of Blackness continue to be constructed and policed. Jada mentions her observation of how Black biracial women are treated within the context of white Greek parties:

> "I know women who are like, half-Black who have had positive experiences. And I think, and once again like that, their positive experiences I think are rooted in white men's behavior, like 'exotic'…and that sounds awful to be like, 'oh, they only like you because like, you're, you're part Black' but like, I think it's like this fetish that like, men have."
> **-Jada, 21, single**

Jada discussed how the only positive experiences she's heard about the white Greek social scene have been from mixed race Black women; however, she doesn't blame the women, but rather the exoticization of mixed-race women within society, which is becoming even more poignant now due to issues such as 'blackfishing' on social media, which refers to how non-Black women appropriate Black women's aesthetics to appear Black or racially ambiguous online (Stevens 2021). Although lighter-complected and biracial women are more *likely* to receive attention from white men, it remains an uncommon occurrence on campus, and this attention is still often based in the fetishization of Black women.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter explored the various experiences of Black women with the white spatial imaginary of Jefferson State University. Contrary to popular belief that Black students naturally segregate themselves, my participants' narratives suggest otherwise. Rather, it's white students' behaviors that solidify the racial parameters of social life and hookup culture on campus. Due to the exclusively white foundation of the university, white students claim ownership over various spaces within Jefferson State University.

When the homogeneity of these spaces is believed to be threatened, white students engage in processes of restoring them to their original structures through ostracism, fetishization, and exclusion. The amalgamation of these racially driven actions is what contrives and sustains racial segregation on campus and serves as a reminder of who possesses the power and authority to determine accessibility to university spaces. These mechanisms create an environment where campus social life is disconnected and rendered almost entirely separate, eliminating possibilities for an interracially intermingled site where dating and hooking up cross racial boundaries. Instead, racial segregation is upheld, with students electing to date and hook up within their own racial groups. This directly affects the romantic and sexual practices of Black women, whose already limited pool of potential partners becomes even smaller, as they find ways to distance themselves from what they believe to be unscrupulous sexual behaviors, potentially sexually dangerous situations, and instances of sexualized racism. This is an *effect* of segregation, not a *cause* (Massey and Denton 1993); Black students don't simply "socialize among themselves on campus" (Bogle 2008; 68)-ultimately, they aren't given much choice.

The next chapter will examine in greater detail the ways in which Black undergraduate students establish a Black spatial imaginary on campus by creating social and cultural spaces both on and off campus, due to the racist exclusion from the white student population (Lipsitz 2011). I expand upon the spatial imaginary theory by arguing that space is rarely only structured by just race and framing it in this way only serves to reinforce the idea of race and racial experiences as monolithic, which has historically isolated Black individuals who exist along the lines of other marginalized intersections of

identity such as gender and sexual orientation. Black students navigate the structure of

higher education in various ways according to the different intersections of their identity;

this demonstrates how the relation between social location and social structure can impact

individual and collective behavior, as well as how racial projects can both challenge and

uphold certain power systems (Omi and Winant 2014).

# CHAPTER TWO: REGULATING RACE, GENDER, CLASS AND SEX(UALITY) IN THE BLACK SPATIAL IMAGINARY

## Introduction

*Grown-ish*, a sitcom series spin-off of the popular television show *Black-ish*, follows the social life of a Black college student named Zoey and her experiences with friendship, dating, and sex. Episode 4 of the first season begins with her lying in bed after a night out when she receives a text from her crush saying, 'u up[19]'? Concerned, she sits up and turns to the camera saying, 'I need my girls'. Her friends all gather in her room as she expresses worry that she's becoming his 'u up? bitch' instead of a mutual crush. The women begin a discussion on what 'hooking up' means, with Zoey asserting that it's just 'making out and stuff', while the others argue that it involves sexual interaction. The camera pans over to her crush, Aaron, who's stressing about her not having texted him back yet; his friend quips that it's because the sex probably wasn't good, and Aaron scoffs, replying 'No, we didn't smash'. 'You said you "hooked up"' the friend says, and Aaron responds, 'No, I said we "messed around"'. Annoyed, the friend replies 'This is why I don't mess with texting. It leaves things too open for interpretation. This is why I just fire off dong [penis] pics'. The camera pans back to the women, who are still arguing over the 'bases' of hooking up. Zoey interjects impatiently, asking if she should text back or not. Her Black friends warn her that if she does, she'll be seen as a 'ho', or

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[19] 'U up' texts are typically sent late at night to another person to signify an interest in meeting up for sexual interaction; basically today's version of a 'booty call'.

promiscuous woman. Her Latinx friend agrees, saying that it will be a power move if she doesn't respond. Zoey thinks this is a good idea and decides not to respond, choosing to wait to see how the situation plays out.

The media example above depicts a complex system of dating and hooking up that involves socially implicit rules, current slang terminology, and preoccupation with technology and social media that very much reflects my participants' experiences. This is a rare contemporary portrayal of college life that follows students of color's experiences since the era of *A Different World*[20], and this snapshot begs the question of what real campus life looks like for Black students socially, romantically, and sexually, which this chapter aims to answer. Let's recall that white spatial imaginaries, in this context the predominantly white university, are created using anti-Blackness as an element of their foundation. This causes students to build their own social system based on racial solidarity, reflecting the "model of democratic citizenship" that is "vital to the survival of Black people and Black communities" (Lipsitz 2011:56) emphasized in the Black spatial imaginary. Studies show that Black students on predominantly white campuses often create their own social communities as a resistance strategy to racist behaviors from their white peers (Jones and Reddick 2017; Griffith et. al. 2019; Tichavakunda 2022). I expand upon this research by being intentionally critical of the role of space to better understand its influence on social behaviors related to dating and hooking up specifically. I argue that these idea and experiences have a significant effect on how Black students are socialized to understand sexuality in college.

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[20] *A Different World* was a popular American sitcom in the late 80s and early 90s. A spin-off of *The Cosby Show*, it followed the lives of Black students at a fictional historically Black college, Hillman College.

In this chapter, I examine how Black undergraduate students create a Black spatial imaginary on campus through the formation of social and cultural spaces, both physical and virtual (Lipsitz 2011). This unofficially established community grounded in racial solidarity, commonly referred to by students as 'Black JSU[21]', is created out of experiences with social exclusion from the white student population. As a social system, it serves as a racial hub for kinship, support, and resourcefulness for Black students. However, as a racial project it both challenges and upholds certain systems of power within its structural organization (Omi and Winant 2014). Involvement is regulated by an informal social hierarchy based on racial authenticity, socioeconomic status, social and cultural capital, and heterogender norms that contribute to the formation of a Black heteropatriarchal system (Pringle 2008). I argue that Black students develop different mechanisms to navigate this heteropatriarchal bourgeois nature of dating and hooking up, which can differ depending on their position within the hierarchy. These methods deviate significantly from those of their white counterparts, in that Black students largely utilize social media platforms to initiate, or reject, sexual or romantic interest. Through these findings, we gain a better understanding of the politics of race, space, gender, class, and sexuality affect marginalized students' social, sexual, and romantic experiences in college.

## **'Black JSU' as a Black Collegiate Spatial Imaginary**

A common theme within the research on Black students' social and academic lives at predominantly white institutions is how they create social and cultural

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[21] A pseudonym, this is the name that Black students use to refer to the Black community on campus according to a significant portion of participants. As a reminder, 'JSU' is an acronym for Jefferson State University.

communities as a mechanism to cope with the various experiences of racism,

discrimination, and exclusion from their white counterparts (Jones and Reddick 2017;

Tichavakuna 2022; Hannon et. al. 2016). Scholars often focus on how topics such as

belonging, methods of resistance, and student racial activism relate to the formation of

Black space. The latest ethnographic study of Black student social life at a PWI is

Tichavakunda's (2022) book *Black Campus Life:The Worlds Black Students Make at a*

*Historically White Institution* which examines the complexity of Black students'

engagement with different campus communities, highlighting in particular the spaces that

often-isolated Black STEM students make for themselves. He argues that Black students

are more than just their experiences of racism, and I expand on this assertion by

highlighting how other intersections of identity such as gender, class, and sexuality

inform constructions and perceptions of race in these spaces. The following section

examines the complexity of these intersectional experiences while simultaneously

addressing the importance of racial solidarity in these types of communities.

  While not all participants were aware of or involved in the self-named Black

community on campus, which was largely dependent upon their social circle and the

politics of their identity, I could tell almost right away when an interview began who was.

And those who were, wasted no time in spilling the tea[22] and describing in detail its

distinct organizational structure. The following subthemes focus on participants'

descriptions and definitions of what they refer to as 'Black JSU' and how it exists as a

social system of Black student involvement complicated by class, social status, gender,

and social media that determines 'membership' in the collective. I argue that the Black

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[22] A Black colloquial phrase for sharing gossip, particularly of the dramatic nature.

spatial imaginary that students have created at Jefferson State University isn't just about

race: it's about gender, class, and sexuality too.

*An Informal Social System of Racial Solidarity and Black Student Involvement*

When asked about the nature of dating and hooking up at Jefferson State

University, knowledgeable participants would promptly bring up the informal student

collective of Black JSU, which I would ask them to describe in detail due to being

unfamiliar with undergraduate student life. They defined it as term that Black students

use to distinguish the Black community on campus from the large white one, which they

emphasized as being almost entirely separate. And I mean *separate*-they host their own

parties, functions, events, homecoming celebrations, you name it. But in reality, it's more

than just a community-it's a cultural and social system riddled with its own politics, rules,

and norms. Kelly details the informal guidelines of what it means to be a part of this

system:

> "Social Black JSU is people that take part in [the Black student
> government], they're Greek or something, they want to be Greeks, they're-
> not as much athletes 'cause they kind of keep them sequestered, but like
> anyone who takes part in like, the Black student life on JSU's campus,
> that's social Black JSU, and then you're naturally a part of Black JSU if
> you're Black and you go to JSU."
>
> **-Kelly, 21, single**

She's explicit in pointing out the distinction between being socially connected to

Black JSU and automatically being classified to it due only to being racially identified as

Black. This process demonstrates how race continues to be a primary identifying factor in

processes of categorization (Lopez 2006); but in terms of *social* definitions of Blackness

in this space, identification requires involvement in or proximity to Black campus life via

Greek life, student organizations, and student government. Regular attendance at social

and academic events is perceived as an indication of interest and connection to racial

solidarity and Black culture. Those who frequent events within Black JSU tend to

become socially and personally connected with one other due to the small size of the

community, and social interactions become a component of the formation of Black JSU:

> "Um, Black JSU is basically like, I don't wanna say the whole, the Black
> population, because you do have people who are Black at JSU and they're
> not in Black JSU, if that makes sense. Yeah yeah, it's like a system. Okay,
> so you have like the [Black social space]. So you know we have our own
> homecoming, we have like different events...so you have the Black
> population from JSU that's involved with those, so like whether you're
> planning those events or whether you attend those events, so that's like the
> first part of Black JSU I guess."
>
> **-Paulina, 19, single**

She further expressed that she didn't feel like she was getting the overall JSU

experience, but rather the 'Black JSU experience' of college life, which signifies how

distinct the racial boundaries are on campus. Elena, a single 21-year-old, reinforces the

point on separation, claiming that even university housing is often divided by race, with

white students and Black students living in specified dormitories. I theorize that this may

be determined by class and socioeconomic status due to the known priciness and

modernity of the campus housing mentioned; this indicates how class status informs

meaning of racial community in higher education (Smith and Moore 2015). But those

involved also emphasized the sense of support and shared values they experienced in

these spaces and importance this had for their sense of social belonging on campus,

which is often echoed in other literature on the topic (Flowers 2004). Amber shares:

> "Black JSU is a black hole (laughs). I like to describe it as there's different
> layers to Black JSU, and Black JSU is where if you identify as Black-it's
> hard to describe 'cause there's a difference to me from being Black *at* JSU
> and being *in* Black JSU. And being in Black JSU is you are in a
> community of people who support each other, you know, we're in similar
> organizations, you know, we go to the same parties and stuff. So

everybody knows each other. If you're Black *at* JSU it's typically-you know, you're more independent…or they're more standalone, and so that's the difference to me."

<div align="right">**-Amber, 20, single**</div>

Like Amber, many of the women mentioned the significance of student organizational involvement or participation as a signifier of social involvement in Black JSU. Those who choose not to participate in this way are considered 'outside' of this social Black community. Jada, who would be categorized as occupying this 'outside' real, clarifies by saying:

> "Well Black JSU-okay, because there are so few Black students on campus, right? …it's like your community is the [Black social space] is, you know, probates or Black Greek life. It's wherever you can find like, your people. Black JSU social spaces tend to be-it's like your caravan of people. People look like you. So different like, organizations…so, like there's a whole bunch of like, yeah, Black groups. And then I would say that makes up Black JSU."

<div align="right">**-Jada, 21, single**</div>

Essentially, involvement in the perceived social and academic support of Black students via organizational involvement solidifies community membership and racial authenticity. This reflects studies that emphasize the role of student activism in creating racially inclusive places for students of color (Rhoads 2016). Those involved in the system were particularly enthusiastic about the racial closeness facilitated by these spaces. Cassie described it as being so strong that it was akin to a smaller scale HBCU:

> "Black JSU is the mini HBCU in this large PWI. Best way to describe it… basically like Black JSU is just a collective of the majority of Black students. And we-I don't really know what like, connects us all. Like I feel…'cause like nobody assigned me to Black JSU."

<div align="right">**-Cassie, 19, in a relationship**</div>

As we know, HBCUs are associated with the embodiment and celebration of Black culture and community (Bettez and Suggs 2012), and so for Cassie to describe it as

such points to the significance of racial solidarity in this informal system; and for Black

students coming from predominantly white areas with predominantly white friends and

associates, Black JSU is seen as an opportunity to gain a sense of racial community and

explore Black identity. Elena describes the magnitude of this racial connection:

> "Like, we're like a tight knit…it's literally a family…like right now, it's
> this guy, he graduated, like he was a senior when I was a freshman, he's
> literally working on my resume, like trying to find me a job. Like we're a
> tight knit like, you can always come back, like family. I mean, I love it,
> but at the same time you got the mess and the drama of the family. Right?
> But we will have each other's back when it really comes down to it."
> **-Elena, 21, single**

Bisa, a 20-year-old in a relationship, agrees with this sentiment, remarking that

the Black community appears more unified to her in how people seem devoted to looking

out for each other. As a racially inclusive social system, Black JSU serves as a beacon of

hope for those wanting to escape social isolation on campus. However, as the next

subtheme highlights, this comes with certain complications.

### *Do Anything for 'Clout': Black Greek Life, Social Status, and Cultural Capital*

When discussing the social politics of dating and hooking up within Black JSU, I

heard the term 'clout' mentioned quite a bit, which I was unfamiliar with; so, I did a little

research. According to Urban Dictionary[23], clout refers to 'being famous or having some

influence or power', popularized in Black oriented social media spaces such as Black

Twitter and Instagram. From a sociological lens, we can see 'clout' as another way to

describe social capital, defined as economic resources gained from being a part of a

social group, as well as 'cultural capital', defined as non-economic resources that

facilitate upward social mobility (Bourdieu 1986). According to the women, gaining a

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[23] A popular online dictionary for slang words and phrases, typically of Black origin.

high level of status in Black JSU through the attainment of 'clout' is prioritized by

students who desire to climb the social hierarchy. Students utilize social influence to

initiate and engage in the dating and hookup culture of campus, with sexual exploits

bolstering social status, though this is gendered: men are much more likely to receive a

boost in confidence and status (Wiederman 2005). Many of these discussions revolved

around involvement in or association with Greek organizations, which have their

historical roots in the Jim Crow era by providing social and academic support to Black

college students during a time of heightened racial and social inequality (Jenkins 2010).

This has created a social legacy in Black campus communities, where Black Greek life

seems to be at the social center of them. Amber affirms this, sharing:

> "At the core [of Black JSU], is like, that's where we have Greek life. And
> that's where you have people who are on [the Black student government].
> And that's where you have people who are very involved in like Black
> organizations. And then you have people who are what I like to call
> 'Greek groupies' who are…trying to figure out what the next like, sorority
> line is. Or they just want to be in the mix of the Greeks. And that's where,
> you know, we see girls get caught up in a lot of bad situations. And then
> you see people who are just in organizations, you see people who just
> know everybody. And on the outskirts, you just see people who are just,
> you know, they're just there, they just know people, they just party. And
> so I'm kind of teetering on the edge of like the outer layers."
>
> **-Amber, 20, single**

Black Greek organizations' history of being considered socially elite continues to

affect members' social roles on campuses today. Their contributions to the Black

community continue to provide major social benefits to members (Bonner II 2006),

historically serving as a space where the Black middle-class gain recognition and power

(Frazier 1955). Amber stresses how compelling the social influence of Greek

membership is, and Cassie concurs:

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> "It comes down to popularity, like you're more popular when you have
> more clout. Clout is like an interchangeable word with popularity…by
> being Greek or like associated with the Greeks. So like, you have kind of,
> like, the Greek friends. So it's just like, you know he's not [in a Greek
> fraternity], but he hangs out with all the [members]."
>
> **-Cassie, 20, in a**

**relationship**

In addition to social and academic support, however, Black Greek organizations

also have a history of being associated with and promoting middle-class behavior and

elitism (Chambers 2017); this made engaging in social Greek events more difficult for

some:

> "I sound like the worst Black person ever…but I've never been to a
> probate[24], I've never been to a frat party…Another reason that I haven't
> considered going to a frat party is because for the four years I've been in
> college, three of those four years I didn't have a car. Black frats don't have
> houses on campus. So they aren't really accessible to freshmen, or to
> underclassmen without cars. So whereas living on campus…I could walk
> to [white] Greek life at any point, I was never-you're not allotted that same
> accessibility with Black frats."
>
> **-Jada, 21, single**

Jada points out the ease at which she's able to attend white Greek events (even

though she's only been to one, due to experiences of racism and objectification), but that

because of her lack of access to transportation, she couldn't attend Black social events.

These politics of class status are further signified through Elena's mention of, in her

critique of white student culture, Black JSU privileges 'top shelf' alcohol, or alcohol of

higher quality, while the white students drink cheaper quality; however, at white Greek

parties, the drinks are often free. This isn't the case for Black Greek social events;

attendees often must pay for admission, alcohol, etc., compounding the classed

expectations of participation in this community. Allison and Risman's (2014) study on

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[24] This is a traditional social event that reveals and presents the new members of Black fraternities and
sororities, emphasizing their commitment to the organization.

race, class, and residence in methods of hooking up found that lack of socioeconomic resources and distanced residential locations were a large barrier for students attempting to enact sexual scripts. This shows how race, class and space "systematically structure opportunities for hooking up" (102).

Other participants shared this critique of clout, although from the perspective of frustration regarding attempts to date or hook up that were impeded due to the infatuation with status. Lea states:

> "I feel like everybody's just sort of chasing the clout…clout is like, I don't want to say it's like fame 'cause it's definitely not fame. But it's just like, if you're Greek on campus, you definitely have clout, like you have attention…like if we *were* celebrities, they'd have fame. So I feel like a lot of people just chasing clout. Oh she's president of this org, so you know, let's try to get close to her and stuff like that…I don't *care*. Like honestly, when I get out of college, that's not going to matter. So it is just sort of like, mmm okay now, but do what you want to do. You know, you could be passing something great up. Because you know, you want to chase clout, but that's on *you*."
> **-Lea, 19, single**

Lea complains that people's emphasis on clout causes them to disregard opportunities for more serious, emotional connections that aren't based on superficiality or sex, and that these things seem important now but won't be in the future. This pursuit of clout also translates to social media:

> "Like I use that word and that was introduced to me a couple years ago. So I don't have the best definition but I think of clout as like, just popularity and like, I'm gonna say like juice and that's another like, you just-you're just *that*, you got it, like you're popular…who gets the most hugs at parties? Yeah, who knows the most people? Yeah, yeah. That was like a thing on Twitter for a minute, like they were joking around like, Black JSU is all about going to the party and getting the most hugs."
> **-Kina, 20, in a relationship**

In this community, social media has an especially critical role in student culture (which will be explored further in the next theme). Because social media is largely reliant

upon visibility, it's logical that it would be utilized as another tool to promote social status. I further theorize that status is emphasized within this community due to its small size and isolation from wider campus culture, accentuating meanings of class and race that impacts students' motivations to date and hook up:

> "Oh, I've noticed a lot of people are very, like, into clout, you know. So like popularity. So yeah, you have a lot of, um, girls who will wanna, like, be with a guy who is like known around Black JSU, whether that means them being in a frat or like them just, you know, being that social butterfly that everybody knows. So a lot of people are attracted to that, and that's where like a lot of those problems come, because it's not just you, it's like all these other people too, and then of course these guys, their heads are amped because they have that clout…I feel like the social scene is definitely like run by the Black fraternities and sororities. And so that's what pretty much makes Black JSU."
>
> **-Paulina, 19, single**

In this community, dating and hooking up seem to be largely based on and influenced by motivations for popularity and social status, which has different consequences for those with identities marginalized by class, gender, and sexual orientation. Membership appears to be unofficially determined by involvement in social activities associated with status, prestige, and capital, and so in some ways, it seems that if you don't have access to the community, then you aren't aware of how to navigate the heteronormative nature of dating and hooking up. Discussions around sex and dating were largely framed in terms of interactions and behaviors between men and women, even by participants who identified as non-heterosexual. Sexual orientation wasn't mentioned when speaking about the social or sexual hierarchy of Black JSU either; speaks to the significant role of heteronormativity that scholars have long asserted affects the structure and organization of hookup culture on college campuses (Bogle 2008; Wade

2017; Freitas 2013). These observations show how meanings of race continue to be impacted by other intersections of identity.

*The Socially Classed Boundaries of Black JSU's Sexual Hierarchy*

Thus far, participants have described Black JSU as a social system of Black student involvement that highlights racial solidarity and support, but also exists as a socially stratified hierarchy due to emphasis on status, capital, and class. I argue that this can be described as a modern collegiate Black bourgeoisie that Frazier (1955) describes in his analysis of the emerging Black middle-class. He argues that for the Black bourgeoisie, "respectability became less a question about morals and manners and more a matter of the external marks of a high standard of living". It seems that for Black JSU, it's not really about respectable behavior as much as it's about respectable and classed expressions of Blackness through infatuation with status and capital, which in some ways has been made easier because of the new age of social media. This causes them to focus heavily on social life in a way that differentiates them from lower income Black people, which contributes to their development of stronger meanings attached to socioeconomic status and class presentation, unlike for white people who are often assumed as occupying a higher-class status. These classed boundaries impact gaining membership into the community in various ways. A portion of participants were critical of this socially classed hierarchy of Black JSU that they felt was exclusive and cliquish, which deterred them from wanting to be involved in the community. Jada was very vocal about her perspective on the nature of Black JSU:

> "But also Black JSU is very… selective in how they um, in how they
> weed people out too. You almost can never win on a PWI. Because there's
> so many-you're outnumbered. But then when you go and you say this is
> my caravan of people, you still find this, like, need to compete amongst

your people. And it's different. It's a different experience…It's just that I've never found like, that was my, like, group of people. And it's not like I haven't felt welcomed. But I know that like… in order to like, feel welcome, I had to put in a certain amount of work to get to feel comfortable. Yeah, and I don't think that's like, how friendships or how bonds should be forged."

**-Jada, 21, single**

Jada feels as though having to put in effort to forge connections means that they're not authentic, and she has no interest in these kinds of relationships. Her additional observation that those in Black JSU compete against one another points to how capitalist ideas of power, control, and individualism help to create fractures, not unification, within communities of color. Lily expressed similar criticisms, stating:

"Black JSU is such an exclusive…it's a very tight knit group. I'm not part of Black JSU which is weird because I'm Black *at* JSU…they hang out in certain groups and they're really involved in campus…but they're very exclusive and…you would think that everyone is family, everyone can get in and everyone, you know, is having fun, but it's very clear if you *are* in Black JSU and if you're not in Black JSU…a lot of people are kinda like, yeah, Black JSU is toxic…I don't think it's toxic…but they can be known as very judgmental."

**-Lily, 20, single**

This framework has created unspoken boundaries around who's considered the 'right' kind of Black person to be recognized as a part of the racial community, which appears to be policed by those who hold greater social influence (Cox 2020). In this way, not just anybody is welcomed into the foray of Black social life; there are other factors at play that regulate admission. Both women, though, acknowledge that the community is important for campus life and Black students' social lives; it's just not set up for *all* forms of Blackness, but rather a strictly defined one. One aspect of this is class, which Diana speaks to in her observation of Black Greek organizations:

"That is very expensive to, you know, be in a sorority, like I don't know what kind of activities they do, but I hear that it is expensive. So, class

could have a lot to do with that, you know, if you can't afford it, then, you know, I don't really expect you to be in it much longer or be a part of it, you know, to begin with, if you, you know, not fortunate."

**-Diana, 20, single**

Smith and Moore (2015) find that odds of closeness with other Black students at predominantly white institutions are significantly reduced for those who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, likely due to feelings of inferiority in comparison to their more privileged counterparts. The women in my study had a general awareness of how class impacted student involvement, but didn't often explicitly acknowledge it; rather, they spoke in classed terms when referencing campus housing, buying alcohol, getting to social events, dressing up for parties, and the like, much like in Bettie's (2003) study of high school girls where class was performed differently according to race. She makes the argument that class is often rendered an invisible category in discussions of race, gender, and sexuality, which I think applies largely to the women in my study as well. Terry, who was open about her low-income background, was very outspoken about these classed meanings of racial identity:

> "**Terry:** It's a lot of politics, you know? You have to be a certain type of Black, a certain type of woman, a certain type of class. To like, even be considered. Like, I'm already booted out and I didn't even fucking try (laughs).
> **Jen:** You said class too?
> **Terry:** Yeah…I mean I'm here, I'm like, maybe considered like poor outside of school. But you know, like, there's like, a lot of like, class issues, like, in um, dating culture, like as well. Like some of these people, like, don't come from a poor ass family. And if you don't have certain things, or like a car, or have a certain type of prestige, you're not like, no-it's like, especially like, within like the [Black sorority organizations]….and it's like, they come from like, I feel like well off families…and like they [middle-class students] could date each other, you know what I mean? But like, they wouldn't date like, someone who (pauses)-I don't know, who's like lower class…like why aren't they considered?"

**-Terry, 21, single**

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This was a heartbreaking discussion and eye-opening narrative for me as a middle-class researcher. Terry couldn't understand why her class status had anything to do with desirability, and why it meant she had no real chance at dating in the Black community on campus. She was resentful, and rightfully so. These are the implications of a higher educational institution based in capitalism; these ideas and meanings trickle down, impacting the intimate lives of marginalized students.

Those within the community, such as Kelly, were also aware of this social hierarchy and how it's placed value not only on individuals regarding their status, but on who they decide to date as well:

> "There's different levels. So if you're Greek, there's a different hierarchy to like who you're…(long pause), you know, your value, who you date, are you dating up or are you dating down. It's not something people talk about I feel like blatantly, but it's definitely, it's there."
> **-Kelly, 21, single**

Even those in the community are not exempt from being placed a certain level in the hierarchy, impacting their opportunities for dating and hooking up that are based in status and popularity. These meanings and ideas impact *all* students' perceptions of their self-value and desirability.

## The Sexualized Culture of Black Social Media

An emerging subject within the literature on hookup culture is the role of social media in mechanisms of dating and hooking up. The most recent study on the specific relationship between collegiate hookup culture and social media is Paul's (2022) research that explores, amongst other things, how social media has impacted the structure of hookup culture on college campuses, examining how hookup scripts differ depending upon the meeting context. This gives us a deeper understanding of the impact of

technology on changing ideas and behaviors of sexuality. But I argue that by focusing on just dating applications, we're missing a wider picture of how students use technology to initiate sexual interest. Due to the association of popular dating applications such as Tinder and Bumble with white sexual practices and behaviors, in addition to limited options for potential Black partners and multiple encounters with fetishization, misogynoir, and outright racial slurs from potential white partners, Black students tend to avoid them. As a result, they often use other social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter to express sexual or romantic interest, and create their own virtual racial sexual scripts that are learned through the procurement of social and cultural capital (Wiederman 2005; Bourdieu 1986) in their social involvement with the Black campus community.

This section focuses on how Black students have created their own spaces on campus not only physically, but virtually. Social media, in particular Twitter, is seen as an extension of Black JSU as a Black spatial imaginary, in that it exists as resource for social connection, event information, and JSU news. However, also within this space is where politics of dating and hooking up emerge. Interest is commonly initiated through DMs, or direct messaging, on various social media platforms. Students often engage in vetting processes to ensure the 'validity' of the potential romantic or sexual partner, and then a physical meetup is introduced. Due to the public arena of social media, however, this complicates students' engagement in these processes due to the fear of personal business being exposed, which at times does occur. In this way, media also contributes to the surveillance of what's going on in the dating and hookup life of Black students, which deters those who prioritize privacy. The intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and space

mean that social media has different meanings and uses for Black students than for their white counterparts.

*Black Twitter as a Virtual Imaginary*

For Black JSU, Twitter plays a central role in the overall social organization of the Black student community. I argue that as a virtual spatial imaginary, it's used to build community and share resources amongst the Black student population as way to keep up with current social events, parties, and news. Research has shown that within the last decade or so, Twitter has become a safe, cultural space for Black Americans to express their Blackness, engage in critical discussions, and share cultural knowledge and humor (Graham and Smith 2016; Florini 2014). It's become so significant, in fact, that it's often referred to colloquially as 'Black Twitter'. In this way, social media has become significant to the creation of Black cultural spaces, fostering a different relationship with technology based on race. Black JSU also utilizes Twitter in similar ways, just on a smaller scale; Jenae explains:

> "I guess because Twitter is so easy to pick and tweet your thoughts, your actions, what you're doing right now, who you're with, what you're going to be doing, in the next hour, like you can find out a lot from Twitter actually. People actually put quite a bit of information on there....events, parties, all you have to do is hashtag #JSU19 and everything comes up… "

                                                     **-Jenae, 20, in a relationship**

Many of the women remarked that they use Twitter primarily to keep up with news, whether that be related to wider social issues or social events happening at JSU. It also serves as a way for them to informally connect with other Black students and socially network with those in other organizations. Through Twitter, students facilitate

and build personal relationships by expressing their own thoughts, opinions, and self-images, while also viewing others'. Kina says:

> "Twitter is a big one…you see people on Twitter…so you know what they look like, and then when you run into them it's like, 'oh, so now we've formally been introduced' and it's kind of like we know each other that way and conversation starts maybe via Twitter and go other places…like my Twitter base is Black JSU…[you get] news about events, jokes, what's trending, what's popular, what's out, what's in, all that stuff is Twitter…I will sit on Twitter for hours to just scroll."
> 
> **-Kina, 20, in a relationship**

Kina, and many of the other women, claim that interest is rarely initiated in person, but rather online, eventually leading to an in-person interaction (whether this be a social connection or a romantic/sexual one). There seems to exist a large disconnect between online communication and interpersonal communication; in the new age of technology, online communication is often privileged, creating different meanings about social relationships (Rosen et. al. 2008). Avery adds:

> "So let's say, um, one of the frats or sororities have an event, they'll go on Twitter…so let's say they're having a party, they'll get a group of people to, I would just say promote that party or that event…like to reach out to different people…or mention someone you don't know or you know, introduce yourself. And you would do like a hashtag, like #JSU19 or something, like whatever your graduating year is. But yeah, it's, I would say Black JSU, they're on Twitter every day, um. Whether it's like jokes, making memes…just really conversing with people I guess."
> 
> **-Avery, 20, in a relationship**

However, Twitter was also used to expose happenings at social events, including what people wore or who they were seen with; so, students don't really have to go to events to know what's going on socially, and sometimes sexually, in the community. Many of the women critiqued this aspect of Twitter, though, because of its potential to expose intimate aspects of their social lives. Susanne remarks:

"So, it's just like, the Black students at JSU…on Twitter, we voice our opinions or certain things that happened at the school or, like certain inside things that, if you weren't there, you don't know about it (pause)…but you can read all up on it (laughs). Thread after thread…I have a Twitter for the sake of knowing what's happening. And Twitter is, I guess different, because people are texting, like, what's happening at the moment… so it's something happening, like, every second on Twitter and it tells you what's trending in your specific location, like hashtags…so Twitter is aware of what's happening and that's why I have it. Just to keep up with what's happening."

**Susanne, 19, single**

While Susanne was interested in the play by play of social life of Black JSU, others were less so due to the social politics at play of what was shared on Twitter. Again, this shows how these spaces aren't necessarily inclusive of all Black students, even when the intention behind them may be positive. Jada shares:

"I am not a good person for the Black community because I stay away from Black Twitter with a 30-foot pole….it's like we pick each other apart for the smallest things. So a lot of Black Twitter is funny, and like, it's the best thing to be on at some point. But you also see like, there's a little self-hate over there, like no, the way that we talk about people…and I think we are the hardest on ourselves. And so I think that's one reason I'm not on Black Twitter."

**-Jada, 21, single**

While Jada, again, acknowledges the benefits of Black Twitter, she also critiqued how it was used to police and validate perceived 'authentic' Black identity. Those engaged in Black JSU were more likely to utilize Twitter as another mechanism to gain and retain social and cultural capital and status (Bourdieu 1986), which again created informal boundaries around Black identity. This affected engagement in dating and hooking up as well, which is explored more in the next subtheme.

*It Goes Down in the DMs: Digital Sexual Scripts*

*Ayy, it go, it goes down in the DM*
*It go down in the DM*
*I tell her, Snapchat me that pussy, mood*

*Or FaceTime me that pussy if it's, cool*
*Boy, my DM Poppin*
*My DM just caught a body*
-Yo Gotti, rap artist

The above lyrics are from a popular rap song from rap artist Yo Gotti in 2015. While rather sexually explicit, they largely reflect participants' experiences with DMs, or direct messages, on social media platforms, and the role they play in hooking up practices. Unlike their white counterparts, Black students don't use dating applications like Tinder to initiate what they consider to be 'random' hookups; they tend to view this as an unsafe practice and avoid them. Studies show that Tinder creates an environment of uncertainty and risk for users that they're forced to learn to navigate (Berkowitz et. al. 2021). For Black students, they're typically socially acquainted with people they choose to engage in romantic or sexual interaction with. Through processes of vetting, checking with close friends and acquaintances to ensure the validity of the person, students decide who and who not to engage with. You talk to someone online *first*, and *then* you meet in person; I see this as another way for Black women also to ensure safety and security. Elena explains in detail how this process works:

> "**Elena:** Sliding into the DMs! The DMs, it go down in the DMs, it go down. (rapping and laughing) It all goes down in the DMs-the Snapchat DMs, the Instagram DMs, the Twitter DMs, you send the eyes, you send the eyes back, it's on in the DMs! And it, it-and then you might have a few like little kickbacks, y'all look a lil' drunk, lil' keke in person, but *everything* has to start off in the DMs. *Nobody* is walking up to anybody 'cause that's- I think everybody is scared of rejection to a certain extent. So really, nobody is like hitting on each other in real life.
> **Jen:** So it's all online essentially.
> **Elena:** Yes, and then it moves to real life."
>                                               **-Elena, 21, single**

Elena's remark that people don't initiate contact physically due to fear of rejection is a common theme in the literature on hookup culture. Students don't want to seem like

they're 'catching feelings' or becoming too emotionally involved; interpersonal

communication is seen as a part of this process and is generally avoided (Dogan et. al.

2018; Freitas 2013). She further explains that sexual scripts via social media are still

largely gendered in the sense that men are often expected to make the first move; if the

woman initiates it (or too often), she's considered desperate or easy. This may be why

Brianna chooses not to engage in DMing:

> "Yes. The texting, the sliding into the DMs, the Snapchatting. I'm too
> scared to slide into anybody's DMs. But like the sliding into the DMs is
> just something…it's just not for me…I have to interact with them in
> person…yeah, the digital stuff, just not really my thing…like my Black
> friends… if they see somebody they think is cute, they find somebody
> who's a friend of the cute person, ask what their name is, ask if they're like
> single, if they should go up to them or anything….I think my Black
> friends, they-we like, develop like, crushes and like, ideas of who like,
> other people are. With like, Tinder, they just swipe swipe, swipe swipe
> swipe swipe swipe."
> **-Brianna, 18, single**

As both Elena and Brianna mentioned, Twitter wasn't the only platform utilized

by students. Both Snapchat and Instagram were also used, and Maya explains why:

> "People just like talk on Snapchat… because, like, within 24 hours, like
> your things will delete or like, once you press on the Snap, you can't get
> them back. So there's no like, proof like if you send nudes, like you're not
> gonna see them again, unless they screenshot it, which can happen. But I
> think it's just because they like, um, they can delete conversations and
> stuff really easily. It's more like secretive."
> -**Maya, 19, in a relationship**

Choi and Sung (2018) found that youth use Snapchat to address their concerns

with privacy; because of the way that Snapchat is structured, it allows users to know if

pictures or text messages have been screenshot, or copied, and allows pictures and

messages to disappear either immediately or after 24 hours, ensuring users' privacy. Blair

adds to this by sharing:

"Snapchat would definitely play a role in it. Because, you know, given the fact that you have the option, you send someone a pic, you add someone, you send someone a picture, it's gone within 24 hours, and things like that, or, you know, you save, you can save a chat, you can delete it in 24 hours, or it can be *instantly* deleted after you *leave* the chat, and things like that. So I guess, like, that can easily facilitate, like, if you're going to…hook up with someone, you can easily, you know, start talking to them or setting the mood, I guess. And, yeah, it's just, like an easier way to like to connect, and I think it does play a big role in it."

**-Blair, 19, in a relationship**

Not much research has been conducted on Black college students' use of social media platforms to initiate dating and hooking up. In their mixed-method study, Khosrovani and Desai (2015) found that most of the Black college students in their study did *not* utilize text messaging or social media to solicit sex partners, which deviates from my research findings. However, this study was conducted in 2016, while the majority of participants who spoke about the use of DMs were from interviews that I conducted from 2020-2022. It's very likely that in that time, due to the constantly changing culture of technology, that Black college students changed their social media behaviors. Victoria expresses her frustration with the overwhelming use of social media:

"I mean, I don't know why people don't communicate, I feel like that has to stem from fear. Or the fact that this generation doesn't do well with like, interpersonal communication in general. Everything is always online, everything's, you know, texting, so it's easier to send a text and be like, hey, or to slide in some of these DMs, because you can hide behind the screen versus talking to somebody, walking up to somebody in like, the [student's social space] that you find attractive and being like, 'hey, like, can I get your number? Can we go out or something like that?' So I think it probably has to do with a little bit of everything."

**-Victoria, 19, in a relationship**

Victoria invited me to speak about my research to an undergraduate Black woman's group that she was a member of, and they also acknowledged that no one approaches anyone physically anymore-it's all about social media and sliding into DMs. I

theorize that these mechanisms of hooking up by Black students are also reflective of

elements associated with respectability politics; Black students desire to keep the details

of their sexual behaviors behind closed doors, which is not a negative thing by any

means. I feel as though Black students want to retain their respectable images while still

engaging in sexual interactions; they don't even want to post public comments or

reactions on Instagram or Twitter for fear that others can see who they're interested in.

But social media makes it easier to initiate hook ups because it relies on snapshots of

people-how attractive they are, how desirable they seem; and Lily remarks as to why

even texting as faded out of the picture:

> **"Lily:** And there's DMs, obviously people liking people's pictures. I'm not
> really big on social media, I use Twitter because Twitter is the funniest
> app in the world. But you know, people slide in the DMs there and say
> stuff. Social media definitely has a big-a *huge* role I think.
> **Jen:** What's with the texting through Snapchat versus like regular texting
> on your phone?
> **Lily:** I prefer texting on my phone. But I do say stuff to people on
> Snapchat. I think it's because you can send pictures right there. I don't
> know. I just it's very common to just go straight to Snapchat and see those
> faces and then it's text there. That's a good question. I don't know *why*
> texting on Snapchat is usually a favorite …"
>
> **-Lily, 20, single**

Social media isn't only used to express sexuality, but to police others' as well; the

next section focuses on how this is a deterrent for students' engagement in hookup

culture, and at times even campus social life.

*Ain't None of Yo' Friends Business: Black JSU as a Social Panopticon*

Many of the women expressed distaste towards the lack of privacy within Black

JSU, and how this discouraged them from wanting to date or hook up with anyone out of

fear that others would find out intimate details. This was largely influenced by the role of

social media within the community, which acted as a surveillance system. Jenae explains:

"Like, for instance, you could tweet about your night, about who you're with between you're with…tweet pictures, or people can tweet pictures to you. And then they have a big thing, which is your DMs, like your direct messages. And that's where people can like, privately send you stuff and most people get screenshotted and exposed…and then they had this thing on Twitter where you could casually, like, send people questions and they could answer them in tweets which (pauses)…*that* was like a crazy thing because people were like, 'oh I remember when we did this last night blah blah blah, and then it's like people in a relationship and they're like, I don't know what you're talking about…Twitter is the root of evil."

**-Jenae, 20, in a relationship**

I argue that social media in conjunction with the social atmosphere of Black JSU operates as a collegiate Panopticon (Foucault 1995) that surveils people's behaviors in social situations. Foucault describes the Panopticon as disciplinary hyper-surveillance system that observes "prisons" in a jail at all times. I use this concept to demonstrate how Black JSU as a social system observes the behaviors of those involved in the community, with Black JSU's Twitter space specifically taking on the role of the "central well" of observation as Foucault describes. Because this Black collective is situated online as well as in person, information can be easily transmitted within the community; anyone can tweet about what someone else is doing at any given time in social settings such as events, parties, etc., causing many of the women avoid dating on campus altogether. They were made almost immediately aware of the nature of dating on campus. For example, if individuals are engaged in a sexual relationship with each other, it is likely that the Black student population of Black JSU will somehow find out, whether through their social circles, social media, or both. Kina shares:

"My experience at JSU with Black people and all that-your business is not just your business here. So like, 9 times out of 10 people will find out who you're fucking just based off of like who talks, and most guys talk. I always think of that line in Drake's song where it's like, 'niggas talk more than bitches these days'. And *that* is my ultimate line, and I stand by that 100%. So guys will talk and that gets around and then everybody's

business comes out in the street because guys want to talk, especially about who you're fucking. And then you know everybody's business based off of Twitter and Snapchat and you can kind of like see little things from that. Um, guys are messy. They will be messing with multiple girls. I've had a guy text me and my friend the same text message…me and my friend were in the same room…we texted the same thing back to him, same word for word. And then we proceeded to tell him that we were in the same room and he's like, 'oh, let's all hang out'. Like are you *that* dumb? You still want to pursue both of us?"

**-Kina, 20, in a relationship**

There is a clear lack privacy within the community, with many of the women expressing their frustration that this causes a lack of intimacy; but they'd rather be single than to become a social spectacle. This is reflective of the ways in which Black women and their behavior have been deemed spectacles for centuries; these Black women are resistant to this form of surveillance in a society that exploits them for entertainment (Hill Collins 2004). Even when they attempt to stay reserved, it almost becomes out of their control. Elena says outright that people watch what others are doing:

"'Cause people are peeping and that's the thing, right, in Black JSU. Yes, we're a family, but people are always watching you. So it's just like you never want to make that wrong move and end up in somebody group chat…I know people who be fucking with people and they not even my friends and I shouldn't even know it, but it's still like…it's not even just the Black JSU here, like a Black JSU graduate like, I know who they be fuckin' too if they fuckin' somebody on this campus."

**-Elena, 21, single**

In this social system, it seems difficult to keep intimate matters private and out of the public eye, with participants often blaming this on the small size of the community:

"The Black population here is so small. It's like if you talk to someone everyone knows and I don't like that. I kinda like to keep it, you know…you can know about it, but my business is my business. I feel like the Black people here are just too open with each other. It's like, you talk to one person and their whole group of friends know, or the next whole group of friends know. It's kinda like hmm, no thank you".

**-Jenae, 20, in a relationship**

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Jenae eventually ended up entering a relationship with a guy long distance after discovering the culture of dating within the Black community, which she thereafter she had no desire to engage in. Susanne shares her own grievances:

> "I feel like here at this school it's kind of cliqued up? People know each other from their designated, you know, location. Oh, if that person knows them, I feel like everybody's in your business. So that made it kind of messy. And we have mutual friends there. Once they get like, notice I'm like involved and started asking questions. It just kind of deteriorated from there."
>
> **-Susanne, 19, single**

But, going back to Kina's point, it's not always about surveillance; some people openly share the personal details of their intimate lives, likely in an attempt to bolster the social status so desired within Black JSU:

> "And people don't know how to not put their business out there. So it's just like, you'll hear like in just in the JSU grapevine, like from word of mouth like that *these* two are fucking with each other. So then, you look at *their* two tweets. *She's* over here tweeting like she's in a relationship, he's still single on his Twitter. *Actually*, one of my friends, her ex, she found out that he was DMing *so* many other females. *So* many other girls."
>
> **-Cassie, 19, in a relationship**

Brianna, very much aware of the convoluted potential of social media, shared that even though she doesn't seek out gossip and prefers to just mind her business, it somehow still manages to fall in her lap:

> "I kind of like to mind my own business. I don't like to be in people's business. Right? So I hear I hear things, I hear things here and there about certain people, what those certain people do with other certain people. And just like, that doesn't make sense because they're supposed to be…*never mind*! But yeah, hookup culture plays like a lot of, along in that because it links back to the apps man. The apps, you can find them on the apps, they try to talk to them on the apps, like, okay."
>
> **-Brianna, 18, single**

Lea echoes Brianna's slight shock to how willing people are to share their experiences:

"I don't want to say it's everyone. But it's more the people that are like very involved on campus and stuff like that. Like, I don't see how they have time to still get on Twitter and all that. But the people that are very involved, they sort of become like personalities, okay. And a lot of people become like *Twitter* personalities. So you know them from Twitter. And, you know, like, they're always talking about like relationships and stuff, like men, and just some of the stuff is just like why? Why are you talking about this? Everyone's business is just sort of out. And I'm more of a reserved, I have a very like, reserved demeanor."

**-Lea, 19, single**

Like I speculated previously, Lea points to students' infatuation with status and popularity as a motivation behind their social behaviors, causing women to see these efforts as ingenuine. It's clear that the physical and virtual spaces of Black JSU often intertwine to create a complicated web of dating and hooking up that students have to learn through experience how to navigate.

## A Black Heteropatriarchal System of Sex and Dating

Much of the literature on heterosexual hookup culture references the male-dominated nature of hooking up that privileges and centers men's pleasure and desire at the expense of women's (Bogle 2008; Wade 2017; Hamilton and Armstrong 2014). Women are often seen as promiscuous if engaging in 'too much' sex, while men's status is more likely to be enhanced through sexual exploits; reliance on traditional sexual scripts continues to structure hookup culture (Wiederman 2005). Despite changing views on gender equality and egalitarianism, even dating practices continue to rely on gender and sexual norms (Lamont 2020). I argue that for Black students, these ideas impact them differently due to the politics of space race, and gender. Although they focus on the role of power and assault on campus, Hirsch and Khan's (2020) concept of sexual geographies, which refers to the spatial contexts through which students move and how access is regulated by peer networks, can be helpful in our understanding of how space

influences behaviors and interactions. I take this a step further by investigating how the politics of race and gender complicate this structural formation as well.

Participants in my research often described Black JSU's social life as dominated by the Black men students, particularly those in fraternities. Due to their social status, they often host more parties and events than the sororities, resulting in greater control over more spaces. This gender privilege also manifests in heterogender double standards and lack of commitment that the women challenge; but with the number of women largely outnumbering that of men, a competitive nature amongst the women is created. This section explores how even with their small number, Black men are able to retain privilege and control within Black JSU, affecting dating practices and relationships with women. The heteropatriarchal nature of this space also leaves little space and few opportunities for those who identify as non-heterosexual to explore their own sexual identities.

## *The Spatial and Social Control of Black Fraternity Organizations*

Those involved in Black JSU often discussed the social privilege of Black fraternity men in reference to the predominant hosting of social events and activities within Black JSU; because of their social status and cultural capital, they occupy the center of social life on campus. This causes them to have more spatial and social control of Black JSU's social spaces. Paulina explains:

> "They [a prominent fraternity] run things. 'Cause they…have a large number, um, as well. They're very, um, they're not only focused on the social aspects, but more the professional. Basically like, pretty much all the parties are thrown by like the Black frats, and like as you know, the Black frats don't have houses here so like, you know, they're not like funded by the school, so of course like all the parties are off campus. Yeah, and then a lot of guys are like that too, where they'll go after girls

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who are very, I guess, like popular within the community. Yeah, it's a status thing."

<div align="right">**-Paulina, 19, single**</div>

Paulina emphasizes how the Black fraternities have both professional *and* social status, which contributes to their privilege within these spaces compounded by normative ideas and understandings of gender and masculinity. I was able to witness firsthand Black fraternities' mechanisms of dominating space at a Black homecoming celebration I attended:

> "One of the Black fraternities was chanting "I want your best friend (repeated four times, and as they said this, pointing at women in the crowd, as though challenging them to respond), all up in my face…and all around my waist", while right behind them, another one strolled up chanting "ratchet ass ho, beat my dick". What had started out as an unapologetic celebration of Blackness had seemingly evolved into something else. The sororities' strolls and chants were more so focused on pride in their sorority, sisterhood, etc.; their 'performances' weren't rooted in the disrespect of Black men. So why were the Black men allowed to do it? I looked around to see how people were reacting. Some were laughing; others shook their head; some even looked annoyed. But there was one overall vibe that I got from everyone-that of resignation and acceptance, because no one protested it. It was clear that this probably wasn't the first, or the last time, they had heard these same chants. I got an overwhelming sense that folks didn't think they could do anything to change this Greek culture that was clearly very entrenched in the community."

<div align="right">**-fieldnotes from Black JSU**<br>**Homecoming Celebration**</div>

What I was spectating seemed to reflect imbalanced heterogender power dynamics and performances of hypermasculinity directed specifically at Black women. These open displays of sexism and misogyny supposedly rooted in expressions of Black pride is reflective of how historically, ideas of racial pride in the Black community have come at the expense of Black women's issues (Davis 1983; Lorde 2007; hooks 2015). These sexist practices normalize the objectification and sexualization of Black women in

these spaces, reasserting their subordinate position as women within the social hierarchy

of Black JSU. Kelly, however, had a different perspective on Black Greek men:

> "Um, and mostly, I feel like, for the most part, Black Greek men don't do the disrespect… I don't really have issues with Black fraternity men as much, there are a few here and there, but for the most part I'm chillin, like I don't feel...they, they know. They know better, they know a boundary not to step… like yeah, you'll be objectified as a woman, but that's one less thing you have to worry about, like race is one less thing you have to worry about. Like, if you go to a white frat, I have to worry about my race, my gender, my sexuality, my status, my money status…At least at Black parties, like I don't have to worry about race, class, not as much. Still a woman, still very queer, still get objectified for that, but that's two versus like the five things, you know?"
>
> **-Kelly, 21, single**

Kelly claims that she'd rather deal with just homophobia and sexism in

Black spaces, rather than the added layer of racism. But my question is, why does

she have to deal with any of these forms of oppression? Why are Black women

often forced to prioritize race over gender and sexuality in these racial

communities? What can be done to transform the enduring culture of Black Greek

life to be more inclusive and equitable? These issues serve to reposition men as

'leaders' of the Black community, which is utterly dismissive of and insulting to

the labor that Black women go, and have gone, through to retain racial support in

these environments despite these issues of sexism. And even still, they continue to

experience disrespect from Black men in various ways:

> "Nine times out of ten if you're going to a [fraternity] party, they're notorious for being nasty guys, they like to crawl on the floor and bite you in the butt or something. I have this video of my first [fraternity] party here…they were doing their chant, right, and like strolling around, and like, one of them licks my friend on her neck, and the other one touched me, like, in my area, and I'm like…'cause when they come out, people tend to back up, and I'm like why? Well now I know (laughs)."
>
> **-Susanne, 19, single**

Susanne's experience reflects the history of Black women being seen as objects to be explored and consumed, not as human beings with emotions. This reinforces a normalized sexual violence that has become acceptable and pervasive within society, especially against Black women (Crenshaw 1991). This objectification is evidence of Black women's subordinate position in society, as Black women's raced, gendered, and sexualized identities as promiscuous rendered them unworthy of protection from institutional sexual violence by the law (hooks 2015; Davis 1983; Hill Collins 2004). Actions like the one above serves as another reminder of the treatment that Black women face within Black spaces.

In the fall of 2021, I gave a short research presentation to a women of color's undergraduate student group meeting, where Black Greek culture was a hot topic of discussion. The women expressed their own perspectives of these spaces:

> "…whenever you're in a space, and you're not a part of it, like it's kind of hard for us to, like we just accept it because we-not everyone has the social currency to do something about changing that space, if it's been existing long before we stepped foot on this campus. So it's kind of like, inevitable. And the fact of the matter is like Black students, we don't have a lot of space on campus. So it's kind of like we want to hold on to the spaces that we *do* have. So we kind of ignore in a way, how they are very harmful to us…even though it could be just as harmful as being in white spaces."
>
> **-Black woman member of Multicultural Women's Student Group**

Her comment again points to Black women's social awareness of issues being made to take a back seat to ensure the legacy of racial kinship in these spaces, rendering them powerless to effectively change the culture. Another woman added:

> "Some of it is entertaining. And so…there's a fine line between, like, I want the fraternity to be themselves…without being super disrespectful about it…they all have their kind of things that make them individual to

that, you know, organization, that group…and so I feel like we should still value in some way shape or form the core of what that is, but just take out the, the disrespect part, or an oil, add the I mean, yes, take out the disrespect…but add some, like consent into it."

**-Black woman member
from Multicultural
Women's Student Group**

These comments illustrate how these spaces can celebrate Black racial pride while still being harmful space for women. They want the performances to continue- just not at their expense, which I honestly don't think is that unreasonable of a request. Chambers (2017) acknowledges this point as well, claiming that the purpose in critiquing these behaviors is not to discredit the contributions of fraternities, but rather to make them more inclusive. But the coordinator of the meeting, a Black woman in her late 30s, remarked how when she was in college, she had similar experiences; and so, it's clear how difficult it is to change the culture of something that's become so engrained in ideas of Black college social life. These findings challenge narratives within the literature on Black Greek organizations that position Black fraternity men as more respectful towards women than white fraternity members, having higher interest in romantic relationships because the small community causes them to be more conscious about their treatment of women, and promoting gender equality within Black Greek social scenes (Jenkins 2010; Ray 2012; Ray & Rosow 2010). I argue that the culture of Black JSU is based in racial solidarity and support, both socially and professionally. But it appears that in these social spaces, Black women must sacrifice their gender to have a sense of community based on race; much like they've been having to do for centuries. However, they are aware and critical of this gendered system of power and finding ways to navigate while still having to deal with the consequences of their gender.

Another significant issue within Black JSU is the gendered double standards and lack of commitment experienced from the Black men in the community. While Black women are seen as promiscuous for engaging in multiple sexual interactions, Black men, on the other hand, get boosts to their masculinity for doing the same thing. This has more significantly unique consequences for Black women due to their history of hypersexualization by broader white society, which over has been adopted by Black men. hooks (2015) argues that "in segregated African-American life, patriarchal sex was not only the medium for the assertion of manhood: it was also reconceptualized in the space of blackness as entitled pleasure for black males" (71), a pleasure that Black women clearly have not had to the privilege to indulge in.

While Black men were eventually able to use their perceived hypersexual stereotype as a benefit in some ways, Black women have not (hooks 2004), instead choosing to engage in respectability to protect their sexual identities. Bisa speaks to this directly:

> "Yeah, so there's just these expectations, like the Black female body's already seen as sexual deviant. So anything we do is gonna get hyper sexualized. So you're automatically seen as a ho if you're out here sleeping with people, doing the same thing that guys are doing, but because you're a woman, because you're a *Black* woman, it's always gonna be seen as 'Oh, you're doing *way* too much' but you could be doing the same as the man. (sighs annoyedly)"
>
> **-Bisa, 20, in a relationship**

hooks (2015) asserts that "by allowing white men to dictate the terms by which they would define black liberation, black men chose to endorse sexist exploitation and oppression of Black women" (181), which clearly still has consequences today. Elena

was also critical of how Black men sexually objectify Black women for their entertainment, stating:

> "Yeah, it's a lot that goes into sex. But people try to play like they hard by like, it's not like-'I could just have sex with you and be done with you'. Because I-and sometimes, like it's so misogynistic, 'cause I remember these boys and they had a competition of like, who could fuck the most girls and they like had like, a tally mark. And it was like literally like a competition."
>
> **-Elena, 21, single**

The women in general directly question traditional sexual scripts that portray this idea of women not being sexual or enjoying sexual interaction. For many, it was a frustrating reminder of how their gender prohibited them freely exploring their sexual identities without the social stigma attached:

> "I was thinking about just Black woman and where Black women are in society, and how we're already devalued. And how a lot of hookup culture is something that benefits men a lot, whether it just when it comes to pleasure, sexually…and I was just talking to some guys, just a group of them. And I was just asking them, like, if having sex too early or too soon, if that changes the dynamic of dating…and the guys I was hearing from they're like, yes, like automatically, they would never, they would not consider having a relationship with a girl if they had sex too soon, because now she's apparently devalued. And I was just, that was so interesting to me. And I was like, wow, 'cause I don't know, me personally, as a woman, I don't necessarily devalue people based on that kind of criteria, there's other criteria at play. Um, so it was really interesting to get that different perspective."
>
> **-Black woman member**
> **from Multicultural**
> **Women's Student Group**

Like this member, the women in my study generally didn't seem to buy into these scripts, expressing disappointment in the continued enactment of oppressive gender norms and disgust at the new ways in which women's sexuality is being referred to:

> "Although we are progressing as like a world of being more modern and stuff, there is still like a traditionalist sort of view in the world that women have to be very proper and very, like, 'Oh, don't kiss on the first date, like,

don't have sex on the first date.' Like, you have to be very, like very innocent, like it's more enticing to be innocent to guys. And then with girls, they're kind of expected just like, they can do whatever. And then with girls there's also like this stigma around like, 'oh, like she slept with this amount of people, she slept with this, she slept with that.' That's also like, stigma that like, she's, she's used, like she's been ran through or whatever…like you'll hear like a high body count for guys, and it's like, 'oh, that's what's up'…'you're a player'…that's cool with guys. But like with girls, it's like, oh, like she's 'ew'."

**-Maya, 19, in a relationship**

'Body count' refers to how many people you've had sex with, again according to

Urban Dictionary. It's often used as a way to determine someone's sexual value: it can be

too high or too low, depending on the social context. But these parameters seem to be a

bit harsher for women:

"And so, the kind of topic of body count. And so if you have these relationships that don't last long, because you're just hooking up, you're just having sex, it's not a long period of time. And so you hook up with whoever, because you're with them for situationship, doesn't last long, or whatever. And so you quote unquote, run up on your body count. And then you get to this age, where it's time to be in a committed relationship, and the men's expectation is for women to have a low body count. And so hypocrisy…the dichotomy or is whatever it's called, that is so interesting that all the younger men all expect you to, you know, just give it up or like, have sex and have sex, you know, so easily. But then we get to a point in time when you should have a low body count. So it's just like, how does that work? How am I supposed to have a quote unquote "low body count" if no one wants to be in a committed relationship?"

**-Black woman member**
**from Multicultural**
**Women's Student Group**

Speaking of commitment, this topic regularly came up in discussions of double

standards. The women expressed that the men on campus largely avoided commitment

and intimacy. Lea spoke to this directly:

"Well you say have a girlfriend. But then you're also talking to me, and you're talking to her and her and her. So it's just like, I don't see any type of loyalty or anything like that…. if you're my boyfriend, you're my boyfriend, like, you're not talking to her or her. Like, it's very hard to find commitment here. I don't know what it is…not to say it's the men, in some

situation's it has been women too, but I just don't see any type of commitment….And it's just like, you know, when is it my turn? But I'm not gonna rush anything. Just where's the commitment?"

**-Lea, 19, single**

I believe that Lea's main gripe here is the factor of dishonesty, which I feel was also an issue for many of the women as well. hooks (2004) argues that "Black men…have found that lying and withholding truth is a form of power", and is used as a form of domination to "exploit and oppress others" (128), but that this actually keeps them from knowing real love. This parallels literature on Black men's issues with commitment. Porter and Bronzaft (1995) focus on college educated Black women's plans for future Black partners using a qualitative questionnaire and in-depth interviewing. While this article is rather dated, it does bring up issues related to commitment and trustworthiness; 15% of the women who answered the questionnaire proclaimed they would remain single after college because they found Black men to be generally untrustworthy and unwilling to commit themselves to permanent relationships. Although these women express an overwhelming desire to get married to Black partners in particular, they find it unrealistic that Black men will meet their standards for a fulfilling relationship. Victoria adds:

> "But in my opinion, I feel as though men on campus…get scared of commitment, I guess, any type of commitment, whether it's you guys being exclusive, or, you know, or not being like being really committed to each other. And, or they don't say what they want. So like…if they just wanna hook up, then they should explicitly say that. Otherwise, they push forward this hookup culture, you know. Hookup culture is defined by the people, right? And so if the majority of people want to hook up, that's fine. But if you explicitly say that I feel like hookup culture kind of just dissolves, you know, like you'd no longer create an environment where people feel like they're forced…the guy that I was last talking to, he had ghosted me for two weeks…he spent the night, and like we were, you know, close and intimate…and I find out he has a girlfriend…he posted her for her birthday".

I heard of similar situations from other women as well, where they believed a guy was interested, just for him to be talking to multiple girls, or end up having a girlfriend. They tended to brush these experiences off as meaningless, but having experienced similar issues myself, I can imagine the sting of rejection that many probably felt in these situations.

### *The Boy is Mine: Competing for the Elusive Black Man*

The last major subtheme was the issue of competition amongst women for the limited pool of men. Hill Collins (2004) talks in length about the competition amongst Black women for a suitable partner that is reflective of limited options for successful Black men in broader society. Black JSU is a smaller example of this; because the number of women outweighs the men, there are only a few mates deemed acceptable to choose from. This sort of competition pits women against one another, rather than facilitating relationships over shared experiences of racism and sexism. At times, this division can even get public and vocal. Jenae shares:

> "And just the other day, I don't know if you heard, but in the [student's social space] it's like these two girls arguing. First I'm thinking it's like a joke, you know, Black people get loud (laughs)….But they were like….they started fighting! She was like, yeah he sleep with me every night, blah blah, and I'm like, are they really doing this in college? In college though? Like we grown as hell! Really? Are we really arguing over dudes?"
>
> **-Jenae, 20, in a relationship**

This example is significant in that it portrays a common theme of Black women blaming and fighting each other over the immoral and untrustworthy behavior of men; but again, because of the limited pool, Black women feel forced to put up with behavior they likely wouldn't normally. Hill Collins (2004) argues that this reflects how "Black

women aim to make themselves more acceptable or desirable by endorsing traditional gender ideology" (257).  Paulina says another aspect of this acquiescence is that women have a desire for social status as well:

> "So it's hard, because a lot of these, not a lot, majority of the guys in Black Mizzou are childish. Um, a lot of them, like I said, they want the like, bond over the title, like they don't want like a relationship, or a lot of them, even if they are in a relationship, they don't act like it or a lot of them are into just sleeping around right now or...and there's more women than men within the Black community, so it's like you have so many girls like fighting over like the same like seven guys, you know (laughs)."
> **-Paulina, 19, single**

This desire for social status is likely compounded by Black women's assumption that they have to do certain things to increase their chances of finding a partner, such as become more submissive (Hill Collins 2004). Not only does this often not pan out in the way they expect because men will take advantage of this, but "women who hide their strength and who basically prop up men who are weak do neither themselves nor the men in their lives a favor" (Hill Collins 2004:257):

> "And you see a lot of my close Black friends are single or trying to get one of these Black men on campus. And it's just not working. Because like they have like such a higher pool of like women to like choose from so nothing is like monogamous. And not saying that's it polyamorous, but no one is like hell bent on like being with one person….'cause the ratio of like, men and women is like still like more women than men and  they have like a higher pool, they can like be fuckboys whenever they want…"
> **-Terry, 21, single**

The small pool of Black men not only creates competition but allows for men to get away with sexual behavior that women can't because of their position of power. But Morgan (2000) argues that framing Black men as an 'endangered species' causes women to focus more on searching for a good catch, rather than the social issues that cause this phenomenon. Elena adds:

"Oh my gosh, it's a limited amount of boys. It's literally a limited amount of boys. It's a limited amount of boys in academia in general, especially Black men. So it's about, I would say the ratio is five girls to one boy. So it's so much easier for girls to overplay their role or try to get that extra attention because like, it's so many, it's like- everybody's competing for that one guy."

**-Elena, 21, single**

As Black women continue to go to college at higher rates than men, these issues are likely to persist in affecting methods of dating and hooking up on college campuses for Black students. Until the core issues that facilitate this behavior are addressed, these issues will continue to be perpetuated and reinforced, at the expense of Black women, who "feel the pressures of both racial and sexual discrimination" in higher education, but still with no real guidance or help on how to adequately challenge and change campus culture (Carroll 1973).

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I explored the different mechanisms involved in how Black college students learn to navigate the heteropatriarchal bourgeois nature of dating and hooking up within the informally established Black community at Jefferson State University, commonly referred to by Black students as 'Black JSU'. I describe how this community operates as a Black spatial imaginary grounded in racial solidarity, support, and kinship through the creation of social and cultural spaces on and off campus due to exclusion from the white student population. However, involvement in Black JSU is regulated by an informal social hierarchy based on racial authenticity, socioeconomic status, and heterogender norms that contributes to the formation of a Black heteropatriarchal space. As a result, methods of dating and hooking up differ significantly from those of their white counterparts; rather than use dating applications such as Tinder

or engaging in alcohol-driven practices, Black students utilize social media platforms and processes of vetting potential partners to initiate sexual or romantic interest. These findings give us a better understanding of the politics of race, space, gender, class, and sexuality affect marginalized students' social, sexual, and romantic experiences in college.

The next and final empirical chapter focuses on the critical role that Black sexual politics (Hill Collins 2004) plays in how Black students choose to navigate dating and hooking up at Jefferson State University. Societal perceptions and representations of Black femininity and Black masculinity continue to impact social, sexual, and romantic relationships between and amongst Black college students. Current attitudes held by Black women towards Black sexuality and Black relationships are impacted by observations and experiences of misogynoir from Black men, racial standards of beauty, and sexual and gender stereotypes that contribute to the emergence of a Black feminist consciousness amongst Black collegiate women. They use this consciousness to challenge gender and sexual stereotypes and focus on their aspirations for success by refusing to compromise their standards of respect. I explore the consequences of these phenomena on Black college students' understanding of their gender and sexuality in contemporary society.

# CHAPTER THREE: NEGOTIATING RACE, GENDER, CLASS AND (SEX)UALITY IN A SYSTEM OF BLACK SEXUAL POLITICS

## Introduction

From the very beginning of my data collection, I noticed a theme across participants' narratives that was particularly salient: aspects of Black sexual politics being used to describe attitudes and feelings towards the culture of dating and hooking up at Jefferson State University and within general society. As a reminder, Black sexual politics refers to "ideas and social practices shaped by gender, race, and sexuality that frame Black men and women's treatment of each other" (Hill Collins 2004:7), particularly those that reflect stereotypical images of Black men and women within mass media. These narrow ideas cause Black people to police each other's gender and sexual expressions according to American ideals of masculinity and femininity, creating a flawed Black gender ideology. This concept isn't specific to the culture of JSU either; the explosion of social and mass media has caused the dissemination and circulation of stereotypical images to become more palpable, meaning that Black popular culture has come to play an even larger role within the effect of Black sexual politics on Black relationships. Let's consider the powerful influence of hip-hop culture, for example. Rapper Kodak Black once shared during an interview in 2017 that "I love African American women, but I just don't like my skin complexion. We too gutter [rough], light-skinned women more sensitive", despite his own skin tone being of a darker complexion. Or in 2019 when acclaimed hip-hop producer Jermaine Dupri commented that Black women rappers aren't talented because they're "like strippers rapping, and as far as rap goes, I'm not getting who's the best rapper", despite Black male rappers dominating mainstream hip-hop for the past twenty years using sexism and misogyny as mainstays of

the genre. Or even last year in 2021 when rapper Lil' Boosie went on a homophobic rant on Twitter about gay rap artist Lil Nas X after said artist said he wanted to do a song with him, saying "Stop trolling me faggot Lol. U a whole bitch playing with a gangsta SMH U can keep sucking dick n getting fucked n your ass n peace", despite Lil' Boosie's own allegations of facilitating the statutory rape of his young son by a paid sex worker. Although Hill Collin's concept is from the early 2000s, we can see how over two decades later these issues continue to persist, and now even more publicly due to the evolution of social media. As she explains, sexual politics permeates every aspect of society: media, politics, and space are impacted by normative meanings of gender and sexuality constructed by those in power who integrate these ideas into everyday life (Hill Collins 2004). These ideas take on the form of a 'new racism' that replicates aspects of white patriarchy as a historical site of oppression (Hill Collins 2004). As the women in my study explain, this has dire consequences for the current state of Black relations.

This chapter focuses on how Black sexual politics inform Black women's understanding of their social, romantic, and sexual lives at Jefferson State University, as well as their general attitudes towards Black masculinity and Black femininity as they pertain to dating and hooking up. I examine how current Black gender ideology continues to rely on flawed stereotypical ideals of masculinity and femininity that affect how Black men and women view and treat one another. This leads to tension amongst them due to the lack of communication and commitment and personal feelings of misogynoir from Black men that cause Black women to adjust their sexual and romantic expectations, creating new meanings around relationships in college. Black women also share their awareness of how current racialized standards of beauty that continue to be impacted by

colorism, class, and bodily shape affect Black men's ideas of attractiveness and beauty. This in turn causes Black women to consider how their own expressions or characteristics of Black femininity impact their social, sexual, and romantic experiences at Jefferson State University. Lastly, I explore how the women's narratives reflect a collective Black feminist consciousness that is expressed through finding ways to reclaim power by defying sexual and gender norms and expectations and using singlehood (for those not in relationships) to focus on aspirations for their education and career. I conclude by delving into the women's narratives of what they desire and deserve in healthy romantic and sexual relationships; this is intentional, as they're often overshadowed by other social issues within higher educational experiences perceived as more urgent.

## **The Current State of Black Gender Ideology**

Hill Collins (2004) describes Black gender ideology as stereotypical ideals of gender and sexuality stemming from white heteropatriarchal American society that Black people are socialized to adopt. This ideology often causes friction when these heteronormative ideas are internalized and then used to police others' gender and sexual performances and expressions according to these normative and restrictive standards. Because achieving white gender norms has been used as a sign of racial progress and upward mobility within Black communities, Black masculinity is positioned as needing to gain "strength" in order to assume "rightful" positions of power within the family and community, while Black femininity is positioned as needing to become more submissive and less assertive to allow Black men to take their natural position. Thus, expectations of Black masculinity come to be associated with dominance, control, and hyper-heterosexuality, while expectations of Black femininity come to be associated with

submission, deference, and heterosexual obedience. Hill Collins (2004) argues that "mass media images of Black femininity and Black masculinity present but one social script among many that encourages certain behaviors and discourages others" (184), fostering the risk for internalized oppression if these images are the only options that Black people believe are available. But "if African Americans design new conceptions of Black femininity and Black masculinity that reject sexism and heterosexism…a new and hopefully more progressive Black sexual politics might follow" (Hill Collins 2004:184).

The following sub-themes explore Black women's thoughts and attitudes towards elements of a flawed Black gender ideology. They reflect on how Black men appear to have an aversion to commitment, highlighting the perceived unemotional nature of Black masculinity that causes them to avoid intimacy and communication. Dissatisfaction is also expressed with current standards of beauty that create boundaries around what's considered attractive femininity and the negative influence of colorism, class, and bodily shape on these ideas. Lastly, they describe their modification of expectations on the nature of current sexual and romantic relationships by creating new meanings around intimate relationships.

*The Perceived Reticence of Black Masculinity*

The development of Black masculinity has relied on emphasizing traditional ideals and values of white hegemonic masculinity, resulting in a "hyper" form where the performances of these values are accentuated. One of these ideals is that of stoicism; women are associated with "weakness" for their alleged emotionality, while men are regarded as "strong" for not expressing theirs (Hill Collins 2004). This has caused the enduring issue of Black men having difficulty communicating how they feel. hooks

(2004) critiques this culture as toxic and unhealthy, remarking that "in our culture, there

is very little concern about the emotional lives of black boys" (88). Bisa shares her own

experience with the consequences of this unemotionality in an anecdote about her

boyfriend:

> "So my boyfriend, he'll project things on me. Because he doesn't want to
> speak up about it. Like okay, just because you can't talk about your
> feelings doesn't mean it's my fault. Like, I've had to explain that to him
> multiple times…you're the one who's got a whole little attitude…I don't
> know how you just flipped the whole thing on me…just like all the things
> that, you know, women are able to express more freely, like, things that
> men will hold back on doing. They just tend to like, project the negative
> energy from those experiences on to other people, and I can just feel it
> easily…"
>
> **-Bisa, 20, in a relationship**

Bisa's frustration speaks to a common issue that women express in heterosexual

relationships of having to handle the bulk of emotional work. Strazdins and Broom

(2004) discuss how this gender imbalance affects the psychological health of marital

relationships, with couples using essentialized frameworks of 'natural' masculinity as a

justification. This is historically heightened within marginalized relationships such as

Black ones, where internalized racism and expectations of hypermasculinity cause Black

men to have issues with emotional expression. hooks (2004) also discusses how this

inability to express emotion can lead to aggressive outbursts, due to "the patriarchal

socialization that insists boys should not express emotions or have emotional caretaking"

(86). Diana discusses how an ex-boyfriend of hers angrily overreacted to a simple

question that she asked:

> "I remember one time I asked like, my ex-boyfriend, I was like, asking
> something about like, a nose piercing, it was just like a small conversation.
> And he got upset, he's like, 'Do you think I'm gay?' Like, he like, got very
> defensive about it. I'm like, a nose piercing? And it's just like, that gave
> me insight to see like, what I do *not want*…you know, you can-it's okay to

express who you are, but don't really, you know, be rude or necessarily offensive…"

**-Diana, 20, single**

Her ex-boyfriend's reaction is not only reminiscent of Black men's history of aggressive emotionality, but also the issue of homophobia within Black communities. Because Black sexuality, and Black masculinity more specifically, has relied on a hyper-heterosexuality, homosexuality has been framed as a source of weakness and whiteness (Hill Collins 2004). This has created a discourse in which LGBQ people are considered less authentically Black for engaging in "white practices". Resultantly, issues of homophobia are intensified within the Black community that often manifest in Black popular culture, as expressed by rapper Lil' Boosie in the introductory portion of this chapter.

Paulina further reflects on how these emotional issues amongst Black men affect their attitudes towards commitment, which in turn affects the nature of dating and hooking up at JSU:

> "Um, because you know, Black masculinity, like first of all, you're not supposed to show affection, you're not supposed to show emotion, you're supposed to be that, you know, I don't wanna say pimp, but…you know, you're supposed to be a player. And you're supposed to, like it's supposed to be normal, you know? You're supposed to play these girls or be able to sleep with however many women you want, be able to not want to commit...it's just annoying."

**-Paulina, 19, single**

These masculine expectations of impassivity cause Black men in contemporary dating and sexual culture to avoid intimacy and communication, which I argue has been bolstered by the use of social media to initiate sexual and romantic interest. Framing sex as purely physical and devoid of emotion within hookup culture negatively affects the critical role of communication regarding expectations of desire, which has different

meanings within the Black community, as "Black men in the segregating world of black sexuality [have been able to] control everything…[and] find affirmation of their power in sexual conquests" (hooks 2015:71). This causes frustration for women who *do* crave intimacy, even within purely sexual relationships. Most women, though, expressed wanting to be in both a romantically and sexually committed relationship. But being in a committed, monogamous relationship, especially during college, just isn't considered enticing. Jenae shares:

> "In our generation, I don't think no one is…very serious right now about dating someone. Honestly in this generation, so crazy, being with one person is not cool. Like it's not cool to have just one girlfriend or to be committed to one person…like to have many women or to be flexible with your dating is really common. So especially in college-so unless you find someone who's on your like, maturity level…I don't think you're going to be able to find someone you're going to be dating for a *long* time."
>
> **-Jenae, 19, in a relationship**

Even though Jenae uses the word 'generation' to seemingly reference all Black youth, she's clearly speaking about Black men specifically, pointing to her perception that men utilize their male sexual privilege to avoid commitment and pursue multiple partners in a way that she clearly doesn't believe similarly applies to women. This caused her, and many of the other women in relationships, to seek commitment elsewhere not at JSU. Maya adds:

> "I mean some-like, mostly girls, I think, will be looking for commitment, but that's like, further down the line. I think guys, *they*-sometimes, some guys treat body count like a score in like a video game, I feel like they're trying to get like, a higher number. And a girlfriend obviously prevents you from doing that. So it's also like, more convenient, like, you don't have to maintain I guess, like a relationship when you can just like, get sexual pleasure, like, day by day or whatever. So it's, I guess its convenience. And I guess it's like…not wanting to be tied down, not making a commitment to one person."
>
> **-Maya, 19, in a relationship**

Maya's comments illustrate the perceived hypersexuality of Black masculinity and its relationship to the literal objectification of women in men's expression and exploration of sexuality. Her comparison of sexual exploits to scoring in a video game points to the general perception by my participants that Black men view them as sexual vessels rather than humans or individuals; and I would go even further to say commodities. In the realm of hip- hop culture in particular, the sexualization and objectification of Black women has been used as a source of capital in rap artists' music production, with men gaining popularity and wealth through mainstream songs containing misogynist lyrics about Black women's sexuality (Rose 2008). hooks (2004) asserts that the construction of masculinity within the Black community "equates manhood with fucking", causing Black men to view "status and economic success as synonymous with endless sexual conquest" (71), and this appears to ring true within the Black community at JSU as well. To be clear, I'm not in any way against Black college students exploring their sexuality; it's just that this exploration doesn't appear to be equally pleasurable or gratifying due to the imbalance of power in gender dynamics. This is concerning because it helps to establish sexual exploration as a *privilege* only available to certain groups, while positioning gender minorities as unworthy and unsuitable.

*Encountering Misogynoir from Black Men*

"I love me some chocolate men…but when Black men hate you…"

I chose to begin this sub-section with the above quote, said by a member of the Black undergraduate women's group meeting that I observed, because it virtually sums up the general perception of the women in my study towards Black men: that they simply don't like Black women. And as illustrated above, some even believe that Black men *hate*

them, which is a rather intense classification. Now, how can it be that Black men (seemingly) don't want women of their own race, and when did it get to a point of perceived hatred by Black women? hooks (2015) argues that "black men can be victimized by racism but at the same time act as sexist oppressors of black women….[with] little acknowledgement of sexist oppression in black male/female relationships as a serious problem" (88). Remember that to gain upward social mobility, Black men learned to adopt white patriarchal gender norms rooted in misogynoir (Bailey 2010) to ensure their middle-class status (Hill Collins 2004). Those who enact this method of progress are often the "most supportive of [the] male subjugation of women" (hooks 2015); the surrounding white dominated space of JSU is likely a constant reminder of the relational power that Black men have to white men's on campus. Capitalist values of competition, control and domination encourage Black men to embrace the heteropatriarchal subordination and derision of Black women. This plays out in discussions on desirability as well:

> "But I do know that like, it's hard for Black women to like, find love and date and stuff, just because of who we are. And then being like, LGBT, [I'm sure] is kind of hard too. Yeah, that's probably it. I just know that it's harder for us to not only put ourselves out there, but for like people to want us too. So it's kind of like, nothing's really happening."
> **-Harry, 21, single**

Harry's perspective not only speaks to the socially accepted notion of Black women as generally unappealing, but also the specific struggles that Black LGBTQ women often face trying to find potential partners as well. This appears to breed insecurity, as Harry mentions Black women's difficulty in "putting themselves out there" seemingly due to the fear of rejection. However, according to Amber, it's not that Black

men don't see Black women as desirable-they just don't consider them worthy of perfunctory respect. She shares:

> "I think they [Black men] like Black women. Do they respect Black woman? I don't know. Because their actions don't show it. Like…the way that they act at these parties. And the way that I see them treating girls who they claim to be their girlfriends is like, it's just disgusting to me…"
> **-Amber, 20, single**

Participants were rather open about the prevalence of infidelity within the Black community on campus, with those claiming to be in relationships still pursuing other sexual exploits. Men in particular will often be dating or having sex with multiple women without their knowledge. hooks (2015) argues that Black men have adopted the obsessive lust and contempt for Black female sexuality rooted in the foundation of white heteropatriarchy "because they, like white men, see black women as inherently more sexually and morally depraved…[and] have felt the greatest contempt toward [them]" (110). As such, they feel no real obligation to uphold monogamy or commitment, and so their disregard is directed towards both their partner and other women of pursuit.

The role of social media in the onslaught of anti-Black misogynistic language was a notable topic of discussion. The women regularly lamented about their observations of the preponderance of misogynistic ideas and attitudes online. This is a general phenomenon amongst young Black women; Littlefield (2008) explores social media as a system of racialization, focusing specifically on its role in the perpetuation of distorted ideas about Black womanhood that are largely related to sexual promiscuity. Black women also utilize social media to combat these depictions of misogynoir, creating virtual spaces in which they feel safe to confront these ideas (Macias 2015). However, social media continues to be used perniciously:

"Oh and these boys, they love to speak about girls, like they love it. They love to tell me about girls' hair…like, 'y'all need to stop wearing weaves', just like, yeah… on Twitter…they'd be like, 'y'all weaves messed up, please take 'em out', yeah. Or 'I'm tired of seeing y'all wigs', like they'll like sweet stuff like that….yes, they love to dog Black women…these boys, they love to claim they love Black women, they love to say they for Black women, all this, but they'll be on social media doggin' us, callin' us hos, like, real like, misogynistic…"

**-Elena, 21, single**

hooks (2015) argues that "Black men expose their hatred by…their vehement verbal denouncement of black women as matriarchs, castraters, bitches, etc…" (102), and while these terms may have evolved over time into ones like 'thot' the underlying meanings remain the same. Further, "since the black woman has been stereotyped…as the 'bad' woman", neither Black men or white men "feels that she deserves protection" (108). As Elena indicates in her account, Black men don't seem to be going on social media to praise or advocate for Black women; it's often to derogatorily scrutinize behaviors and aesthetics that don't align with heteropatriarchal expectations. For most of the women, this lack of respect is not only frustrating, but hurtful:

"I feel like Black women, we have come a long way and we have fought for equal rights and so much. And for Black men to just-especially Black men who date white women and don't like Black women? Or I will never date a Black woman? That's, that's really a slap in the face. You *came* from Black women? How could you not *like* a Black woman?"

**-Jenae, 20, in a relationship**

Jenae is speaking directly to the historical phenomenon of Black women supporting, aiding, and defending Black men in their fight against systemic racism, only to be ignored and dismissed when attempting to incorporate their unique issues with gender and sexuality within the fight for liberation. hooks (2015) proclaims that "Black men are able to dismiss the sufferings of black women as unimportant, because sexist socialization teaches them to see women as objects with no human value or worth"

(hooks 2015:101) and positions Black women as their enemies. Like Jenae, others are

fiercely intentional in their repudiation of this toxic narrative:

> "*No* respect from Black men. None. And who fucking raised you, a Black
> woman right? We are like, literally like, the most marginalized. Even more
> so if you are like queer, or [have a] a disability…cause like these men are
> capable of treating women with respect. They only share that with certain
> women and they exclude *us* from it."
>
> **-Terry, 21, single**

Participants often referenced Black men's family members to underscore their

critique of Black men's paradoxical view on respect towards Black women. Many of

them expressed disbelief that men can have Black mothers, sisters, and aunts but continue

to pointedly disrespect Black women while reserving more humane and sophisticated

treatment for other races of women. Maya shares in the frustration over this hypocritical

mentality:

> "And then there's always arguments even about like, Black men not liking
> Black women. Which is weird. Because like, you *are* that race…like
> you're betraying your own race…like you're also that skin color, like, your
> mom's that skin color and you're criticizing another woman for being that
> skin color. But like your mom is, so it's kind of weird. Like, I don't know.
> That's just what I see on like, a lot of social media. And it's, and I feel like
> that's really harmful for like, especially young Black women growing up,
> 'cause I could not even imagine."
>
> -**Maya, 19, in a relationship**

Maya's concern over the growing influence of social media on the dissemination

of these anti-Black misogynistic narratives is valid considering the ever-evolving

advancement of technology within current society. Hill Collins (2004) frames the

expansion of media as the primary source of this 'new racism' that she discusses, which

refers to the wider dissemination and consumption of Black sexual stereotypes that

reinforce racial ideologies. I believe this critique is adjacent to the undergraduate Black

woman group's perception that it's "okay for other races to act or look like Black

women" and still be considered desirable and attractive, but Black women are scrutinized and demeaned for engaging in the same displays or possessing the same aesthetics of femininity. Let's take, for example, our favorite friendly neighborhood cultural appropriator, Kimberly Kardashian. She's been praised and idolized for years for her augmented curvy body and "successful" adoption of culturally Black aesthetics like French braids, acrylic nails, and hoop earrings, while everyday Black women who embody or display these same characteristics are ghettoized, sexualized, and debased. These historical power imbalances allow white women in today's culture to benefit from the appropriation of Black aesthetics at the severe disadvantage of Black women.

Just to be clear, though, white men are the ones responsible for this existing race-sex hierarchy: Black men just "merely accept and support it" (hooks 2015:112). This implicit acceptance and reinforcement has gone largely unchallenged within the culture of the Black community, although I argue that the steady increase of Black women rappers and their endorsement of anti-sexism and sexual autonomy has been influential within the realm of popular culture. Until both Black masculinity and femininity are autonomously reconstructed by both Black men *and* Black women *together*, outside of the influence of white supremacist ideology, these ideas and behaviors will only continue to be strengthened and reinforced in new ways as the structure of society evolves.

*Adjusting Sexual and Romantic Expectations*

Prior to arriving to Jefferson State University, many of the women had preconceived notions about college sex and dating that were quelled rather quickly. They indicated that serious, committed relationships within the Black campus community are far and few in between; in fact, most of the participants with partners were in long

distance relationships (which is detailed in Appendix C). According to them, the use of official titles like "boyfriend" and "girlfriend" is rather rare, with Black men in particular wanting to just "chill" without any expectations or pressures for something more serious. This caused the women to reevaluate and redefine meanings and expectations of relationships, intimacy, and sex, which is a common practice amongst Black women in college due to limited partner options and emphasis on casual sexual relationships (Henry 2008). However, many still desire both sexual satisfaction and emotional intimacy, with some avoiding dating culture altogether due to their general skepticism of men, while others attempt to find ways of obtaining these values despite men's aversion to committed relationships (Henry 2008). At times, Black women choose to remain in relationships with men who have numerous other sexual partners rather than settling for solitude, even when it comes at the expense of what they genuinely desire (Williams 2006). Others try to find ways around these types of relationships; for example, the Black women in my study discuss the development of indeterminately defined liaisons where Black students engage in sexual intercourse and emotional intimacy without the formality of a relationship, serving as a midpoint between casual and serious sexual/romantic relationships. These types of relationships were referenced by some as 'situationships', a term I was unfamiliar with, but which Amber describes as:

> "A situationship, to best define it to me, is you both care about each other, you both have very strong feelings towards each other, you're willing to do things for each other that would normally be done in a relationship with a boyfriend and girlfriend or partner and partner, but I think somebody in the relationship…does not want to take that next step with having a title in it."
>
> **-Amber, 20, single**

Essentially, these types of relationships have all the makings of a committed relationship-except, of course, the title. The reliably resourceful Urban Dictionary once again comes to our aid in understanding these different cultural colloquialisms. In similar fashion to Amber, Urban Dictionary defines "situationship" as a mutually exclusive commitment without a label, or the state of having official emotions for one another beyond friendship but not to the point of a relationship. And unsurprisingly, the man is often the one less interested in officializing the relationship (although some women genuinely desire these informal relationships); so, while they reap sexual and/or emotional benefits from this arrangement, they're simultaneously able to retain the privileges of being technically single. Later in the interview, Amber disclosed that she was involved in a situationship for nine months, only for her former companion to enter into a committed relationship with someone else shortly thereafter; but the real cherry on top was that she ended up sharing a class with the new girlfriend. Paulina positions the inequitable nature of these relationships as responsible for Amber's unfortunate situation (no pun intended):

> "Situationships are the-you're together but you're not dating, dah dah dah. And titles do matter because boys like to say, oh, we have a bond, a bond is stronger than a title. Okay but, I don't care, a title, it's just common sense. And a title also solidifies that commitment, it also solidifies you not being out here and doing whatever, 'cause I mean sometimes guys will cheat even if they have a title, but like, it's easier for them, you know, to not have it so then they can just be like, 'well you're not my girlfriend'."
> **-Paulina, 19, single**

She's highly critical of how men, in her opinion, use these relationships to avoid personal accountability for engaging in sexual relationships with other women while still reaping the benefits. She blames this phenomenon on the encouragement of apathy rather

than intimacy within social constructions of Black masculinity. Cassie also shares her

personal experience with situationships:

> "Because you know how you have that situationship? It was a lot, like, I
> don't know how to act in this situation…. [and] I don't think he knew what
> to do. Because there was no definition with us. It was just like, we were
> having sex all the time, but then I would…try do relationship stuff and he
> would like, kind of just stiffen up…February…we started actually just
> being like in a real situationship…people were like, 'Oh, so y'all
> together?' and we're like, no. But yeah, but no… it was just very
> confusing for me mostly because I was just trying to figure out where his
> head was at. And at the same time, I didn't want to pressure him into
> anything because he doesn't do well with pressure. And I was like, but
> that's not my nigga, so I can't do that (laughs)…and that was my life for
> like six months."
>
> **-Cassie, 19, in a relationship**

For Cassie, the lack of defined boundaries caused confusion for both her and her

partner regarding expectations on how to act, with him seemingly being more averse to

intimacy while she obviously coveted it. Lawrence-Webb et.al (2004) examine the

influence of patriarchy, love, and roles on Black relationships. The historical complexity

of gender roles within the Black community due to gender and sexual stereotypes often

causes confusion and conflict within relationships over expectations of behavior. Cassie's

situation is a clear example of role ambiguity, where unclear expectations hinder

successful performances (Hutchinson 1999), which I presume is likely the case for many

young people who engage in these types of relationships. When hooking up for an

extended time period, individuals are subject to "catching feelings", or the unexpected

development of romantic feelings, which people try to avoid, actually (thanks again

Urban Dictionary), due to the nature of hooking up as an emotionally detached practice

(Freitas 2013). Dogan et. al. (2018) explore this phenomenon within their study on Black

college students' sexual encounters, discovering that students often avoid non-sexual

intimacy out of fear or mistrust, while others face barriers in their pursuit of intimacy. This is a demonstration of Freitas' (2013) point that the new social norm of hookup culture dominates students' attitudes about all forms of intimacy due to its emphasis on emotional suppression and separation between physical and emotional intimacy. While this can be beneficial for some (again I absolutely promote the safe exploration of sexual desire as a sex-positive feminist), it seems that there's often a discrepancy in partners' expectations for one another, which is largely facilitated by the endorsement of non-communication. The social pressure to adhere to the rules of hookup culture causes students to enter and/or settle for situations that they don't genuinely want. This imbalance leaves many students' actual desires unmet and unfulfilled, creating a culture where most students feel robbed of healthy, gratifying sex lives and positive dating experiences (Freitas 2013).

Not all participants used the term 'situationship', though they did reference this type of relationship in other ways. For example. Victoria used the word "entanglement", an expression popularized by actress Jada Pinkett-Smith's confession of an extramarital relationship with musical artist August Alsina. Unlike the other women who were more critical of this new standard, Victoria professed that she'd prefer this type of affair over a committed relationship. When asked to elaborate on the meaning of this term, she explains:

> "Um, I guess just as messy as it sounds like-basically having the perks of a relationship without actually being in one, I guess is the best way that I could describe it…we're involved intimately with each other…we're hooking up with each other and we're talking to each other, and we're not talking to anybody else. But we're not calling it a relationship. Like we can go on dates, like we can go hang out and do activities. But we're not really calling them dates…it's an informal relationship, I guess, if that makes

sense, but it's not as casual as a hookup got…I have enough commitment
from you where I'm comfortable enough to be intimate with you, I guess."

**-Victoria, 19, single**

Like the situationship, this idea has all the elements of commitment, without the

commitment, which at face value appears to be what Victoria wants. But when I asked

her why, she responded that she didn't want to get attached to anybody and that this type

of relationship serves as a protective mechanism, although directly afterwards she also

admits that attachment is still likely to happen. I can't be certain, but it seems to me that

she may have convinced herself that this is the type of relationship she wants in order to

have her desires met in some form or fashion. This is a common narrative not only within

the literature on hookup culture, but the literature on Black women's collegiate dating

experiences (Wade 2017; Henry 2008). Many of the women alluded to the idea that

strictly hooking up doesn't provide opportunities for their emotional or intimate needs to

be met, and so they develop other ways for them to be fulfilled (even if partially),

whether this be through these loosely defined romantic/sexual relationships or the pursuit

of serious partners not on JSU's campus. These narratives clearly portray how hookup

culture has blurred the lines between traditional dating and hooking up. A member of the

Multicultural Women's Student Group shares her personal opinions on this obscurity:

> "I'm not currently hooking up or dating myself. But the people around
> me…I've just seen, like, hookup culture has blurred the lines between
> traditional dating because some things are happening that…like skip the
> steps of traditional dating. So I feel like it really has blurred. And some
> things that people do, they think it's okay because it's just a hookup. But it
> shouldn't be okay, 'cause you should be treated better than just a hookup,
> obviously. Because I feel like hooking up can also lead to bad treatment,
> depending on what the situation is, like, the feelings."

**-Black woman member
from Multicultural
Women's Student Group**

Her critique of this blurriness as a contributing factor to the mistreatment of certain people is largely reflected within hookup culture research. The loosely defined rules of hooking up don't encourage or promote equitable, respectful treatment, which should honestly be at the core of any sexually intimate relationship (Bogle 2008; Freitas 2013; Wade 2017). Black women have historical difficulties with collegiate dating in the first place, and I argue that the nature of hookup culture doesn't do much to alleviate them. Again, the practice of hooking up isn't in and of itself the issue; it's the social meanings, attitudes, and beliefs associated with it that leave college students, but especially Black women, at a disadvantage.

This sub-section demonstrates how women come to create their own meanings of relationships, intimacy, and sex as a result of their experiences with the culture of dating and sex within the Black community on campus. These narratives are important in understanding how Black women respond to changing social ideas around collegiate relationships and the effects it has on their attitudes and behaviors. Because of their particularly fraught history with sex and dating in general, it's important to explore their unique role within the current state of Black ideology.

**The Boundaries of Black Femininity**

While there are standards of masculinity that Black men feel as though they must endorse, there are also certain expectations of Black femininity that largely revolve around physical attractiveness. Hill Collins (2004) discusses the influence of white hegemonic femininity on constructions of Black female sexuality and its effect on perceptions of attractiveness as well as sexual behavior. She argues that "all women engage an ideology that deems middle-class, White femininity as normative" (Hill

Collins 2004:193), and reliance on these standards of beauty automatically deems Black women as less attractive or just outright ugly. This Eurocentrism privilege thin bodies, straight hair, and other facial features such as light eyes, slimmer noses, and thinner lips (Hunter 2005). Over time, both Black men and Black women have internalized these standards, with women engaging in practices to change their appearance such as lightening their skin, wearing colored contacts, and straightening their hair, while men learn to scrutinize and demean Black women who aren't in proximity to these ideals. Once again, we see how the nature of Black relations continues to be impacted by white society.

The following sub-themes explore Black women's perspectives on existing standards of beauty that create rigid boundaries around attractive femininity. Colorism was a particularly significant topic, with participants being openly critical about the fetishization of lighter skin and straighter hair types that render darker-skinned women as unappealing and masculine; even those from biracial backgrounds or of lighter skin tone were critical of these ideas. Women within the social Black community on campus, Black JSU, also shared their experiences with classed expectations of dressing for social events and parties. In part, this goes back to politics of respectability that influence expectations of how to dress and behave for middle-class women. Lastly, the women discuss bodily standards of beauty, such as adhering to a certain bodily shape associated with Black women referred to as "thick", meaning larger breasts, a smaller waist, and larger legs and buttocks. They critique how those with differently shaped bodies are less likely to be perceived as sexually alluring or romantically appealing. These narratives are evidence of

persistent stereotypical meanings of gender and sexuality that continue to affect standards of beauty to this day.

*The Persistence of Colorism*

The insidious role of colorism within the Black community is a tale as old as time; and while I resent having to reiterate the intricacies of this oppressive system after decades of study and analysis, it was such a pronounced theme amongst participants' responses when I inquired about standards of beauty that I had no choice but to incorporate it in my analysis. It's untoward how this day and age, skin tone *still* manages to affect perceptions of attractiveness and femininity. As is well known by now, colorism refers to the discrimination against individuals with darker skin tones amongst people of the same racial group, which has its roots in the advancement of white supremacist ideology through the process of colonization (Hunter 2005). Within the Black community specifically, this prejudice stems from the era of slavery where lighter-skinned Black slaves, products of rape by white slaveowners, were afforded systematic privilege due to their connection with whiteness, which ranged from lesser violent treatment to opportunities for education and skilled labor (Hunter 2005). Over time, these ideas became imbued with American standards of attractiveness, socializing people within the Black community to police one another's relation to them. This scrutiny is especially poignant, though, for women; these ideas tend to be more harmful to them due to the social implementation of higher standards for femininity than masculinity, highlighting the relationship between beauty and sexism (Hunter 2005; Wolf 2002). This may be why participants were especially critical of Black men's endorsement of these ideas, especially on social media:

"Um, I definitely think colorism is an issue. Um, I think it is easier probably for lighter skinned people or like white women to like, get more response on a dating app…I think colorism is a thing mainly because of like social media…there's skin bleaching products, there's like, people like making their skin look whiter…and there's always arguments on there [Tik Tok] like,' oh, like if only she was like lighter', like, 'she's cute for like, a Black woman' and it's like, what are you talking about? Like, I always see that on Tik Tok and there's always arguments about that."

-**Maya, 19, in a relationship**

Hunter (2005) asserts that "the maintenance of white supremacy in this country is predicated on the notion that dark skin represents savagery, irrationality, ugliness, and inferiority. White skin, and thus whiteness itself, is defined by the opposite: civility, rationality, beauty, and superiority" (2). Maya's observations strongly align with these ideas; the promotion of colorism by Black men has existed in the media long before dating applications and social media were around. Hip-hop culture has celebrated "light-skinned beauty" within the last couple of decades, with lighter-skinned or racially ambiguous women being prominently featured in music videos and songs. For example, Soulja Boy boasts that he's "lookin' for a yellow bone long-haired star/Thick in the hips, come get in my car", while A$AP Rocky brags "For instance, I get-get my dick licked/Red bone complexion like a piglet, kiss kiss". Brianna, who is darker-skinned, also addresses the role of social media in the depiction of these ideas:

"**Brianna:** Oh, there's one thing that happened on Twitter, like, last month, when there was a guy that um, had four pictures of like dark-skinned artists. I know Ari Lennox was one and Teyana Taylor was another one. And he said that they looked like French Bulldogs."
**Jen:** I heard about that, yeah.
**Brianna:** And it's like, no one ever says that about light skinned women. Like, people like call us roaches. And like if we have short hair, then we look like men. And it's just like…most people I know really don't like, go up to like dark-skinned women, at least not from what I've seen. What I've heard from like, my friends or anything, like dark skinned woman are like, not really approached or like fantasized about as much as light-skinned woman. Yeah, I think that's something that plays a big part."

Her comments point to the unfair, unequal, and quite frankly disgusting treatment of dark-skinned Black women. Unfortunately, their masculinization is nothing new; the standard of femininity has always been constructed through whiteness, so the further one strays, the more masculine one is considered. Her observations are also clearly reflective of the social construction of dark-skinned women's undesirability; but the comparison of their looks to bulldogs and roaches is beyond unsettling and infuriating-*this* is what literal dehumanization looks like. Even when artists promote the acceptance of all skin tones, like Wale in his song 'Shades' where he proclaims, "Shade doesn't matter, heart makes the lover", darker-skinned women are *rarely* praised or sexualized within Black popular culture in the same way that lighter-skinned women have been. Diana echoes this sentiment while adding another layer of complexity:

> "This might be like, you know, typical…but I feel like…Black men in general, like tends to gravitate more or, *like* light-skinned women more? I don't know, I don't want to say exactly colorism, because I feel like a lot of it goes unknown. But yeah, like, I feel like if you have more, I don't want to say European, but kind of features…like lighter or you know, if your nose isn't so big, you know, kinda like that. I know, with my locs…I know, it's becoming more popular, but I don't feel like guys like that. But I'm cool with it, of course, but…it's just something that I observed. I don't know why it is, you know, but it's something that I've observed and I wonder why it is."
>
> **-Diana, 20, single**

Her perspective delves a little deeper into the intricacies of colorism by pinpointing how specific features such as nose size and hair are also tied up in these Eurocentric standards of beauty. I believe her hesitancy in classifying these observations as colorism may stem from a slight denial that this oppressive system could still possibly exist at this point in history. What was of particular interest to me, though, was her

mention of hair, which ultimately became a rather frequent topic of discussion within conversations on skin tone. Diana's belief that her locs[25] aren't generally considered attractive by men alludes to the continued devaluation of natural Black hair. I made a point to assure her that her locs were beautiful and she returned the sentiment, allowing us to share a brief moment of solidarity as two loc'd up sistas. Terry, dark-skinned with short natural hair, was quite vulnerable in her personal account of colorism:

> "I'd be lying to you if I said I don't think about…like seeing a guy across the classroom like, 'oh man, he's so cute but he wouldn't like me' because I'm like, dark-skinned, I got short, you know, coarse nappy hair…I'm just not aesthetically pleasing to them. So I don't even have a chance…I'm like, ugly, like already when I walk in the door…like I *know*, if I was lighter-skinned, if I had curlier hair, if I had light brown eyes…if I embodied all of those like, I wouldn't have this problem…the whole world would flock to me."
>
> **-Terry, 21, single**

It honestly crushed my spirit to hear this beautiful woman talk about how the denigration of dark skin has affected her. Contrary to what this quote depicts, Terry is actually quite confident in and embraces her natural beauty-she just doesn't perceive others as appreciating it in the same way. Nevertheless, her perception that others automatically categorize her as ugly *must* impact how she sees herself, and the politics of hair only further emphasizes these issues. I also have "coarse nappy hair", as Terry describes. As a child, I remember sitting miserably between my mom's legs as it was braided or flat ironed [straightened], on the verge of tears as my tender scalp was pulled and prodded. I hated my hair; I saw it as a nuisance, difficult to manage and not pretty enough to be worth the trouble. It took many years of intentional unlearning to finally be able to value and appreciate it in its natural state. These are the consequences of a society

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[25] Also referred to as dreadlocks or dreads, this is a culturally Black hairstyle that's formed by locking or braiding, resulting in rope-like strands.

that teaches Black girls to despise, rather than celebrate, their unique and natural aesthetics.

Colorism is not only effective within the realm of beauty, but in other facets of society as well. Hunter (2005) argues that "light skin works as a form of social capital…[and] are able to convert it into economic capital" (37), and so lighter skinned women are more likely to have higher rates of educational attainment, income, marriage, and even self-esteem (Thompson and Keith 2001). This is an indication of the systematic nature of colorism that structurally either produces or prohibits advantages. The biracial and lighter-skinned women in my study were aware and critical of the various privileges that came with their skin tone:

> "You know, I feel like at least from my experience, the kinds of people who usually are interested in me are people that are darker than me. And that's because I am of a lighter complexion. And I feel like a lot of darker men will only talk to or date women who are lighter than them. Like they won't date people who are like the same complexion as them."
> **-Mimi, 19, single**

Mimi, who's biracially Black and white, is very transparent about the fact that it's mostly darker-skinned men who are interested in her. As we saw Kodak Black profess in the introduction, dark skin is associated with aggression and hostility, which over time has been internalized by darker-skinned men, causing a fetishization of light skin (Hunter 2005). Bisa, also biracially Black and white, shared similar experiences:

> "**Bisa:** Um, I've noticed that a lot of dark-skinned boys and brown skinned boys are attracted to me…so like, if I'm going to look for somebody that I want to hook up with it's going to be somebody that's either my skin color or darker, not lighter. I don't know why light skin boys don't like me, but hmm, whatever."
> **Jen:** Why do you think it's darker-skinned men that prefer your type?
> **Bisa:** 'Cause of that light-skinned fetishization that, 'oh, you're foreign, you're exotic, you got this 'it' factor that Black women just don't have because they're just Black, like just stupid stuff."

Hunter's (2005) concept of the beauty queue "explains how sexism and racism interact to create a queue of women from the lightest to the darkest, where the lightest get the most resources and the darkest get the least" (71), which I believe Bisa is undoubtedly speaking to. The exoticization and fetishization of light skin have created a queue that provides more opportunities for lighter-skinned women within the dating and sexual culture of the Black community at JSU, and within general society. As both Brianna and Terry shared, it's quite clear who's given access to the front of the line and who's forced to the back. Hunter's (2005) assertion that beauty is a tool of patriarchy and racism is evident in these women's narratives; for Black women trying to navigate dating and sex in college, those not fitting within these boundaries of beauty are basically excluded from opportunities for socializing romantically or sexually.

*Expressing Black Femininity through Class Performativity*

Another prominent theme within participants' perceptions of femininity and beauty is stylistic appearance and class performativity. Those within social Black JSU in particular emphasized the importance of "dressing to the nines", as the old saying goes, for social events and parties, which included fashionable attire, makeup, and freshly styled hair and nails. Scholars argue that the historical exclusion of Black women from the category of womanhood has resulted in their de-feminization and masculinization (Hunter 2005; Hill Collins 2000; hooks 2015). They further assert that the capital gained through upward social mobility has been used by middle-class Black women to occupy and emphasize femininity, which historically has been exclusively available to white women only (hooks 2015; Hill Collins 2004). This has created a standard of femininity

that's based in whiteness and class, causing other races of women to be scrutinized

according to this ideal (Hunter 2005). In fact, controlling images of Black women are

often portrayed through lower-class depictions of Black femininity and womanhood such

as the mammy, matriarch, and welfare queen (Hill Collins 2000). Black women's

primary approach to challenging and combating these representations has been through

the adherence to respectability politics (Higginbotham 1994; White 2001); but this has

strictly applied to middle-class Black women who've internalized the idea of white

femininity as the standard for beauty, while working class women have largely rejected it

(Hill Collins 2004). While I maintain that the women in my study showed little to no

concern about social approval from white society, I argue that some were particularly

invested in middle-class presentations of femininity within the Black community's social

scene, which I argue demonstrates the enduring impact of race and class on standards of

femininity. Cassie explains how the special attention paid to appearance is considered an

ordinary aspect of Black JSU's social culture:

> "**Cassie:** First of all, the way everybody dresses…*you* need to have a fresh outfit…you can't show up in jeans. You need a *full fit*…it's a sight to be seen. Everybody's heels are this big…and you pop outfits for everything, it's not just parties, it's a random Thursday, it's anything, like they love to show out.
> **Jen:** Why do you think that is?
> **Cassie:** Because I think it's a competition between people in Black JSU. Yeah, to see like who looks the best, to see who can get the most likes on their picture on Twitter."
> **-Cassie, 19, in a relationship**

She's rather upfront about Black students' intentions behind these classed

performances of gender, indicated by her remark that "they love to show out". Because of

the historical struggle for Black people to gain middle- and upper-class status, it makes

sense that they'd have a desire to flaunt the benefits of it as a celebration, of sorts, of their

achievements. I speculate that the unprecedented development of social media has also

had a significant influence on expressions of gender, as demonstrated by Cassie's

mention of the desire for "likes" on Twitter. Participants also discussed the differences in

standards between the Black and white communities on campus:

> "And they're usually nice, they're different, like with the white frat parties
> people like dress down, they just wear like jeans and a shirt, but like with
> the Black ones, like you wear like dresses and heels and just really cute
> like…"
>
> **-Paulina, 19, single**

These divergent expectations of gender presentation point to how class is

emphasized in racially marginalized communities. In her study of South African women,

Motsemme (2003) draws from U.S. Black feminist theory to discuss how notions of

desirability and beauty are expressed through style and appearance as a way to validate

femininity. She argues that dress and style aren't simply objects, but rather become an

aspect of social relations (Motsemme 2003; Tseelon 1995); however, these attempts to

assert Black femininity also have the potential to reproduce status hierarchies and social

class. Kina uses classed language to further emphasize Paulina's point above about

differences in expectations:

> "And the whole idea of like 'looks' is very much a thing here too. Um,
> Black JSU is known to bust fits. Bust fits meaning like we dress very
> well…you have on a really nice outfit. It's really-you look good…I can
> wear jeans to a white frat party here and be completely fine,
> comfortable…and if I went to like the Black parties, you wear skirts, you
> wanna maybe put on some heels, definitely beat your face, your hair has to
> be done. Like it's completely different."
>
> **-Kina, 20, in a relationship**

As noted previously, the women in the Black undergraduate women's group that I

observed shared how they felt there were higher standards of femininity for Black women

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than other races, and these various accounts appear to support this observation. I argue that because the standard of femininity has and continues to be based in middle-class whiteness (Hill Collins 2004; Hunter 2005), white women don't have to emphasize their appearances in the same way because of their intrinsic embodiment of femininity. Because of Black women's history of exclusion from femininity and womanhood, these ideas play out differently within the Black community. Amber discusses the pressure to conform to these standards and expectations:

> "And you're more aware, you know, 'cause anybody could be watching you. So you're more aware of how you look. Like no, when you go to a Black JSU party, you better pop out. Like you better pop out or there's no point in you going. And I didn't understand that until I came here. I mean, I was cute at parties but it was like *no*, you better have your new 'fit, like I was all fashion nova last week trying to find an outfit for this party like *stressed*."
>
> **-Amber, 20, single**

Adhering to these expectations is not only time consuming, but costly; Amber's mention of trying to find a new outfit for an upcoming event illustrates the vital role of economic capital in these spaces. Students from working- or lower-class backgrounds, or even those who work part- or full-time jobs to pay for their education, likely don't have the disposable income to be able to keep up with the style via paying for hair, nails, and clothes. This may be why others, often positioned on the periphery of social Black JSU, were more critical of these classed criteria for appearance:

> "I don't know, I think it's for attention? Because to me, it's not that serious. If there's a party at a bar-jeans and a cute top, it's good. But you see girls, with the tight dress on, the heels, the full face of makeup, hair curled and everything. And it's like, I feel like I underdressed (laughs). So it's like, a big fashion show. And I feel like it's more so for the attention 'cause you have a big group of girls who take the pictures and the guys who flash their watches and you know, their shoes and what not. So I think it's for that."
>
> **-Susanne, 19, single**

Susanne's comments reflect the powerful influence of hegemonic femininity on

marginalized populations. Schippers (2007) and Hamilton et. al. (2019) examine how the

institutionalization of ideal standards of hegemonic femininity determines who receives

privileges and who experiences disadvantages along the lines of race, gender, and class.

Bettie's (2003) work on Mexican-American and white high school girls reveals the

existence of what she terms "the symbolic economy of style", key markers of femininity

such as hairstyles, clothes, and nail polish that express group membership and class

status. Those who performed more normative femininity were more likely to have higher

social and class status, and it appears this may apply within the context of Black JSU as

well. For example, Terry's dark skin tone and decision to sport short natural hair and

remain barefaced may been a hindrance to her involvement in the Black community in

her "failure" to meet their standards of femininity. Diana implies that these expectations

are based in superficiality:

> "Often this very surface-level…judging a person by the way they dress,
> you know. If they don't have you know, like the Fashion Nova on, then
> you know, they don't really…[have] like that kind of *look*, you know, their
> clothes…like how a person dresses is, I guess, kind of does show, you
> know, their class or you know, their status kind of."
> **-Diana, 20, single**

To clarify, I genuinely support the idea that Black femininity should be celebrated

and expressed in any way that women choose. The issue lies in the prioritization of a

certain *type* of femininity, which incontrovertibly has its roots in middle-class values and

social status, that seems to exclude those who choose to express their gender differently.

During this research process, I've wondered at times how I would fit into the

culture of Black JSU; whether I would be influenced to adapt to the norms like Amber

and Kina so that I could experience a sense of belonging in the Black community (which

I so craved in college), or if I would renounce these norms at the expense of social engagement like Terry or Susanne while at the same time embracing the benefit of being comfortable in my gender expression. Moments of reflexivity like these were crucial to my analytical process because they forced me to make space for nuance in my narrative interpretations; because truthfully, these issues really are not Black or white (no pun intended). These women's decisions, thoughts, and behaviors are informed by many different factors, and I, nor anyone, is in the position to cast judgment. The purpose of my critical race feminist analysis is to elucidate the sources of these issues in the hope that we can better understand how to address and deconstruct them.

*Politics of the Black Feminine Body*

This final sub-theme examines the racial and sexual politics involved in the construction of the Black feminine body, which was largely discussed by participants in reference to white standards of beauty and bodily shape attractiveness. The women generally had a heightened social awareness of how these ideas affected social perceptions of Black femininity. They were also openly critical of the ways in which these ideas have been used to scrutinize Black women's expressions of gender and sexuality. Gilman (1985) examines the historical construction of the Black female body in relation to the standard of the white female body and its lasting effect on perceptions of female sexuality. This resulted in the stereotyping of Black female sexuality as deviant stemming from racist notions of Black women's "deformed" genitalia and buttocks and primitive hypersexuality. Black women not only continue to be associated solely with their sexual parts but are still measured according to a standard of femininity and sexuality based in whiteness. Lily explains:

"I mean, I think-the entire country…or [for] the entire world, the European standard of beauty is the standard of beauty. Um…it takes a lot of Black girls, you know, a *long* time to be comfortable in their skin. And to love the features that they have that *now* are so *popular*, apparently. That's so, so funny. Oh, how convenient. Um, and love their skin shade, and so it took me a very long time to… not really care how dark I was or how short my hair was or stuff like that. It doesn't matter now."

**-Lily, 20, single**

Lily is extremely vulnerable in her account of how these standards affected her own sense of self-esteem, but she also points to the effects they've had on Black girls in general. She also critically references how historically demeaned Black features are now considered attractive and acceptable because white women have decided that they're desirable. This power imbalance regarding race and sexuality continues to negatively impact Black women while privileging white women. Poran's (2002) study on race and beauty shows that amongst her Black, Latina, and white women participants, Black women were the most aware of whiteness as the standard of beauty in relation to cultural definitions of attractiveness while white women were the least. This awareness was largely shared across the women in my study as well. Jenae shares:

"In essence, they *can* or are able to get a Black woman, so I feel like they do [date white women] to show and achieve like…*I* have the golden star, I finally got the top of the top, because I feel like white women are seen as, you know, the basic standard of beauty or the basic standard of a wife form or what have you, in society. And where do Black woman *fit* into those standards? We *don't* fit into those standards. The fair skin, the long pretty hair, the slimness-Black women don't fit into those descriptions."

**-Jenae, 20, in a relationship**

She is explicitly critical of how standards of femininity based in whiteness have caused Black men to pursue and regard white women as the ultimate prize while Black women are cast aside because they don't "fit" within these confines. And it's not even that they don't fit-it's that they *can't*, and never have. This is another way in which white

femininity has and continues to be used to demean and devalue Black women's

femininity and sexuality (Hill Collins 2004).

On one hand, Black women's bodies have been judged according to white

standards; on the other, they've also been judged according to Black ones. This was

discussed largely in reference to standards of bodily shape for Black women within

primarily Black spaces. Madeline comments:

> "…what I think of, like Black women and like, hookup culture…[is] just
> that idea, I think, of people like over like sexualizing them maybe? And
> like, thinking of like, big butt, big boobs…and like, I don't know. Um,
> may like big-boned or like…I don't know, like big thighs. If that-that
> probably sounds a little weird, but (laughs)."
>
> **-Madeline, 20, single**

Her observation isn't weird at all, though; in fact, it's quite common. Thinness is

one aspect of white femininity that's been rejected within the Black community. As

discussed briefly in Chapter 1, society has a particular obsession with Black women's

butts, which has been reinforced in the Black community through hip hop culture's

sexualization of Black women's bodies that portrays them as sexual objects (Romero

2017; Rose 2008). The celebration of Black women's bodies within Black popular

culture, like the 1977 song 'Brick House' by the Commodores which boasts "She's a

brick house/That lady's stacked and that's a fact/Well put-together, everybody

knows/This is how the story goes", were replaced over time with objectifying lyrics

resulting from the commercialization of hip hop in the 1990s (Rose 2008).  Now we have

songs like the 2003 one 'Tip Drill' by rapper Nelly, who gloats "I said it must be ya ass

cause it ain't yo face/I need a tip drill, I need a tip drill[26]". And as Madeline pointed out,

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[26] According to Urban Dictionary, 'tip drill' refers to the sexual act of a man using the tip of his penis in the
crack of a woman's buttocks without penetration.

these images and lyrics prioritize a certain kind of Black female body, which is colloquially referred to as "thick"-curvy with a slim waist and large breasts, legs, and buttocks. Amber jokingly speaks to this standard in reference to her own body type:

> "And it's like, look, I been thick, y'all didn't want me then! (laughs). You gotta be a certain type of thick. Because guys will be like, you know, I want thick thighs. I wanna you know, Double D, I want this, like, well, I have that. But there's also other things that come with it, you know, I'm not gonna get a snatched waist, I'm just not going to…yeah, it's just hard, it's really hard… to just kind of fit, you know. "
>
> **-Amber, 20, single**

Again, being considered "thick" exists on a fine line-Amber identifies herself as thick, but also as not the "right" kind of thick because of her stomach size. There's a clear difference between being considered thick and being considered overweight. This may have a lot to do with class too, however, in Black women's perceptions of their own bodies. Allan (1993) finds that lower class Black women are more likely to be heavier and perceive attractive body size as heavier, while middle- and upper-class Black women had stricter views on weight and body attractiveness. Hughes (2021) also studies this phenomenon, looking at how this standard contributes to Black women's body dissatisfaction and causes them to develop different methods to deal with this bodily discontent. However, it also points to Black women as autonomous in their ability to reconceptualize ideas of body image as a way to facilitate a stronger sense of self-esteem. Jada references this bodily standard as well in addition to her critique of the unrealistic beauty standards for Black women:

> "I just-I love Black women…but then I get so *mad*…the expectations for beauty in general are just [dis]heartening for Black women…to be expected to be superhuman and also like, your looks? Like, 'well, I should have big boobs and a big butt but a small waist'…it's a lose lose every time…but then like Black beauty is not just about how you look, it's how

you carry yourself, like you have to be, you know, the strong Black woman…"

**-Jada, 21, single**

However, Jada is not only speaking from the perspective of a Black woman-she's speaking from the perspective as a plus-size Black woman. Later in the interview, she critiques how the newfound body positivity movement has been focused primarily on white women, when Black women are often the ones to face harsher consequences of fatphobia. For example, controlling images such as the mammy, the matriarch, and the welfare queen are often depicted as large, not to mention darker skinned and of course low class, contributing to the historical asexualization of larger Black women (Hill Collins 2004). If I could, I'd love to pick her brain today about the influence of musical artist Lizzo, a plus size Black woman who embraces her size and sexuality in every way possible, on society's perceptions of large Black women; and within the last couple of years, plus-size Black women have been creating their own spaces as a way to challenge fatphobia by celebrating fatness (Williams 2021). As a plus-size woman myself, it's taken me *years* to accept my body, and at times it's still a struggle. But this is why celebrity figures like Lizzo and other online plus size fashion icons have been so important for the representation of big Black women; it's not only helped in my journey of self-acceptance, but given me hope that the culture may finally be changing for the better, even if it's slowly.

These narratives demonstrate the deep complexity of Black femininity: at various points in history, it's been simultaneously constructed as both sexually grotesque and sexually enticing, leaving little room for the celebration of differing shapes, sizes, and skin tones.  Until standards of femininity are no longer rooted in subordination or

superiority along the lines of race and class, these issues of beauty will continue to play an integral role in sexual and romantic interactions.

## **The Resolution of Black Feminist Sensibility**

Despite the numerous ways in which Black women struggle to successfully navigate the nature of dating and hooking up at Jefferson State University, I found that many of them possess a social awareness of intersectional issues specific to Black womanhood. This awareness undoubtedly contributes to what I perceive as the development of a Black collegiate feminist consciousness that exists as a byproduct of their lived experiences with racism, sexism, and other systems of oppression (Hill Collins 2000). Through the theoretical lens of Black feminist thought, Hill Collins (2000) describes this consciousness as a form of resistance to oppressive constructions of Black womanhood by using self-definition as a mechanism that can be used to empower and humanize. This empowerment entails "rejecting the dimensions of knowledge that perpetuate objectification, commodification, and exploitation" (Hill Collins 2000:308) by focusing on the unique standpoint of Black women as a source of knowledge production. I found within these women's narratives varied elements of this feminist perspective through their outright rejection of assumptions that Black women will acquiesce to unfair and inequitable treatment by Black men simply due to limited options. These Black women refuse to comply with stereotypical expectations of femininity as weak, subordinate, and submissive, and openly assert their strength, independence, and worth.

The following sub-themes examine how the women in my study elicit a Black feminist consciousness through their attitudes and behaviors. I explore how some reassert a sense of power that's rendered subordinate by unequal gender dynamics through the

defiance of gender and sexual stereotypes. Black women find ways to manufacture their own standards of respect and equality as a response to experiences of sexism from men regarding sexual and romantic expectations. Those not in committed relationships use their single status to focus on educational and career aspirations. Black women are often classified as emasculating by being too "strong" or "independent"; the women in my study instead embrace these ideas, deciding to focus on engaging in serious relationships *after* achieving their goals. Lastly, I focus on my participants' specific narratives that detail their beliefs of what constitutes healthy and respectful relationships. A significant portion of my work has focused on what these women *don't* want; for this final section, I plan to focus on what it is that they *do* want. Hill Collins (2004) argues that "Black women, by definition, cannot achieve the idealized feminine ideal because the fact of Blackness excludes them. Dominant gender ideology provides a social script for Black women whereby everyone else needs Black women to be on the bottom" (199); the women in my study vehemently challenge the dominance of this ideology in ways that uphold self-defined standards of Black femininity and womanhood.

### *Reclaiming Power through Defying Gender and Sexual Norms*

While most of the women spoke about the different gender and sexual norms that exist within campus dating and hookup culture, some were more specific about how they developed mechanisms over time to respond to and challenge these norms. Members of the women's undergraduate group asserted that in general, men get to do as they please and that no one's teaching them how to be respectful; but I found that the women in my study established their own ways of demanding respect, which looked differently according to whom it was. hooks (2015) says that in her research "most Black women

[she talked to] believed men were superior to women and that a degree of submission to

male authority was a necessary part of woman's role" (83), which may still be true in

certain contexts, but didn't largely reflect the narratives of the women in my own

research. Their largely negative experiences with trying to date or hook up caused them

to develop ways to prevent these experiences from occurring again, which I assert as a

reclamation of power due to the general subordination of women within hookup culture

that's a result of gendered power imbalances (Bogle 2008; Wade 2017). Victoria shares:

> "I feel like, you know….maybe me not looking for a relationship is me
> being sucked into hookup culture, and like playing it by my own rules,
> you know, me setting the standard before the guys do…I don't know, it's
> just really confusing and frustrating. But yeah, there's definitely a hookup
> culture on campus. And I think the guys perpetuate it. And maybe girls
> feel like they need to go by that standard."
> **-Victoria, 19, single**

She spoke about previous negative experiences with men whom she'd be intimate

with or developed feelings for, only for them to turn around and "ghost" her (the sudden

disappearance of a potential partner without warning or explanation) or begin a

committed relationship with someone else shortly after dating/hooking up with her. This

caused her to now set the standard at the beginning of romantic or sexual interactions

with men in order to prevent these situations from happening again. Her decision to "play

by her own rules" can be considered her version of reclaiming power that's been taken

from her in these situations. Paulina had a similar experience in high school where she

engaged in a "situationship" that ultimately didn't lead to a committed relationship,

which affected how she's navigated dating in college. She shares:

> "So by like our senior year, we were like together but not together. And so
> I invested a lot of time, I invested way more time than he did, and so like I
> learned from that, that I'm never gonna, like, do relationship, wifey things,

you know, for somebody's who's not my boyfriend or somebody who-we don't have that title."

**-Paulina, 19, single**

Because of her previous experiences, she's avoided entering into another situationship in college, deeming herself worthy of a committed relationship rather than wasting her romantic energy on something that ultimately doesn't benefit her. For some, though, engaging in casual sexual relationships is what they want, but these often prioritize men's needs and desires. Elena is very critical of this, sharing:

> "*I* be making people take me out on dates, I'm very demanding. I'm like, you not gonna do me no type of way, if you think you finna get this pussy…if you wanna come see me, you gotta bring me some food…. bring more than yourself cause that's just not enough for me. And my biggest thing is, my feelings ain't never gon get hurt. 'Cause you not finna play me, and I think that's the thing. Everybody's like trying *not* to get played….[and] I feel like with Black women, like I said, we like at the bottom of the barrel. Like sometimes we could really be treated like shit. And I just feel like it's so important for *me* to not be treated like shit. Like if a dude communication is off, I'm instantly cutting you off 'cause I feel like, if you're not gon hold me to a higher standard, then I'ma hold myself to a higher standard and I'm not putting up with your bullshit."
>
> **-Elena, 21, single**

hooks (2015) argues that some contemporary Black women adopt subordinate roles in relationships for the benefit of the race and racial liberation; while this seems true in some instances, considering the root of Black JSU in racial solidarity, we can clearly see that Elena was not putting up with these expectations of submissiveness. She's not only playing by her own rules but is *demanding* respect in every encounter that she has by highlighting her worth through expectations of benefits other than sex. In other words, she refuses to be taken advantage of for her body and has developed agentic ways in which to prevent it. Later in the interview she shares her opinion that Black women are often taken advantage of because they don't respect themselves enough to set a certain

standard of treatment. She adopts a mindset that in order for the Black women in JSU to develop a sense of strong self-worth, they need to match the men's energy to avoid certain treatment, they need to match the men's energy. This idea of "matching" men's energy often plays out in hip hop feminist culture as well, with Black women reverting normative sexual scripts and applying them to men (Morgan 2000). At the end of the day, I think she just wants better for Black women, and questions why they keep trying or going back to men after experiencing outright disrespect. I speculate that the prevailing disrespect of Black women not only within dating and hookup culture, but within wider society, causes them to almost expect it in these interactions.

hooks (2004) argues that the nature of conflict within Black relationships is not about Black women wanting gender equality or men wanting male dominance-it's about them not feeling that the other is upholding their role. However, this idea has appeared to change over time according to the women in my research, who were *very* vocal about their desire for relationships (either sexual, romantic, or both) that prioritize gender equality. Kina describes how the unequal nature of dating on campus caused her to seek a more respectful, equitable relationship elsewhere:

> **Kina:** What I'm looking for and what is here…are not the same thing.
> **Jen:** What do you mean by that?
> **Kina:** I mean like…I feel like I want a commitment, I want somebody that's like serious and like puts as much effort that I am into the relationship and that's not what I feel like I receive when I'm here…I just feel like guys, when they try to talk to or try to be on a certain level with me, it's for other, um, motives, it's for other things that they think might benefit from. Sexual benefits…and that's not really what I want….so I'm kinda just like, I'll just stay with who I'm with 'cause at the end of the day that's not the only thing he's with me for."
>
> **-Kina, 20, in a relationship**

Kina feels that she deserves better, and so rather than dealing with the culture of

dating at JSU, she finds someone that recognizes her worth as more than just a sexual

conquest. Cassie also shares how she got fed up with the nature of the situationship that

she was in for many months, and resulting in an ultimatum for her now-boyfriend to

choose to either be with her, or look elsewhere:

> "And then I basically had to give him an ultimatum for us to get together. I
> was just like '*look*, what's gonna happen here, we're either going to leave
> this room together, or we're just going to be cool. And we're not having
> sex. And because I've already like developed these feelings for you, we
> can't be close friends, that just can't happen. So we can just be cool. We
> can be civil, you know? 'Hey, homie, how you doing? Bye.' And so that's
> how we got together. It's not romantic, it's not cute."
> **-Cassie, 19, in a**
**relationship**

Now to some, ultimatums are often seen as the idea of "forcing" someone to make

a decision. I argue, though, that while it got to a point where the nature of the relationship

no longer benefited her, she still ultimately left the decision up to him; he had the choice

to either leave or enter into a relationship with her, and it was clear to me that if he didn't

choose to be with her, by that time she was confident enough in her worth to deal with it

accordingly. These various examples demonstrate how there's not just one way to "be

feminist", but that it rather depends on the person and situation. This points to the

complexity and individualism of Black women, and how although they share experiences

of sexism and misogyny, they find their own ways of asserting their worth.

*Me, Myself, and I: Singlehood as Motivation for Success*

Single Black women have historically been painted as bitter, emasculating, and

unlovable, and this unfortunately continues to remain true in contemporary society.

Think-pieces often focus on the "sadness" of how many Black women are unmarried,

questioning why their statistics are so much lower than other races (Morris 2014).

However, as Black women continue to earn undergraduate degrees at higher rates than

any other group in the US, it's clear that this has not deterred them from pursuing their

aspirations. The single Black women in my study, although of course desiring committed

relationships (at least most of them) did not let these stereotypes hold them back. Often,

independent, successful Black women are seen as overstepping "the bounds of

femininity" by obtaining positions of authority reserved for men, contributing to the

perceived emasculation of Black men (hooks 2015). But the women in my study aren't

concerned about "emasculating" Black men; if anything, they also desire "men with goals

and aspirations" such as themselves, as described the women in the undergraduate Black

woman's group. Victoria discusses postponing engaging a committed relationship so that

she can focus on her education and career:

> "Yes and no. I'm not looking-um, so I'm very logical (laughs). And so I
> don't want to be in a relationship, or get emotionally attached to somebody
> while I'm in college, because I'm really career drive. So I'm okay with an
> entanglement (laughs)…just because I'd like to not have to choose
> between that person and my career and deal with the emotional trauma
> that may come from that."
>
> **-Victoria, 19, single**

Moorman (2020) examines how Black women define singlehood for themselves

in opposition to "popular discourse [that] characterizes single Black women as desperate

and dysfunctional". She found that her participants utilized her concept of "strategic

singlehood", which references how Black women intentionally practice and sustain

singlehood as a way to maintain their freedom, foster growth, or ensure safety. This work

gives us a different approach to thinking about how Black women celebrate singlehood,

challenging social narratives that they're lonely or desperate. Paulina speaks to some of these issues as well:

> "I think it's more of like a societal pressure, 'cause I feel like back then, it was more of like… your parents. Like okay, you need to be married like, by the time you get out of college, you know what I mean? That type of stuff, whereas like now, I don't think it's coming from your parents. It's just coming from society 'cause like, most women…by the time they get out of college, they get married, or they get married to the person they met in college. So um, yeah, personally for me, I do want to get married, but I don't have a rush, like I don't want to get married like my senior year of college. Or I don't even wanna get married a year after. I kinda want to like establish myself, and like you know, travel and find my career and stuff and then like, I'll get married."
>
> **-Paulina, 19, single**

Paulina points to the changing culture of dating and sex as a main cause of why Black women aren't finding future partners in college, referencing those in older generations as having more opportunities to get married in or right after college. But that's not even what she wants; she actually desires to focus on her career and enjoy her single life before settling down. The women in general were openly unapologetic about their pursuit of success. Lea shares:

> "I feel like-I'll be a junior next semester, I'm a semester ahead. And so it's just sort of like my time here, I don't want to say it's coming to a close but I'm like at that halfway point. So it's just like, not to say I'm gonna close myself off. But honestly, I'm trying to focus on my career, because I honestly still do not know what I want to do yet and I'm at that halfway point. So it's just, I'm not going to force it to happen…my education…this is what I'm here for. So while I'm here, I'm gonna focus on that."
>
> **-Lea, 20, single**

Prioritizing their education was described as extremely important for *all* of the women; finding someone would obviously be an added benefit, but that was not the main reason they went to college. Susanne adds:

> "It's a trying experience, but that's like my whole thing….I know what I want out of life. I have the opportunity to get an education with a

scholarship and that's what I'm doing. I want to be a nurse practitioner and depending if I get into nursing school…so I mean, I have it all figured out. And that's all I'm here, is to execute my plan."

<div align="right">**-Susanne, 19, single**</div>

Because Jada was nearing the end of her collegiate career, she had missed her opportunity to find a future partner in college, but she still wasn't in a rush to find someone right after she graduated:

> "I'm trying to find a job for myself, or I'm trying to figure out my post grad plans...so I'm not in a position to be like, I'm searching for someone. But like, when I feel like I have gotten my life together, and hopefully in the near future, but I will be looking for someone…"

<div align="right">**-Jada, 21, single**</div>

At the undergraduate Black women's group meeting I observed, they also remarked that they wanted to focus on their careers and being independent, and as a result, relationships tend to take more a back seat. However, some were self-conscious that this may deter men or push away commitment, while others pushed back against this idea by emphasizing the opinion that it's okay to focus on yourself, your goals, and finding out who you are. Black women may be a little sad about the current state of dating and sexual culture, but not enough so that it affects their determination. They view their singlehood as a way to focus on themselves, not as a primary source of sadness.

*What do Black Women Want?*

So much of my project has focused on what Black women don't want, so I wanted to conclude my final empirical chapter by focusing on what it is that they *do* desire. But I'm going to go about this a little differently than before: I want to highlight and foreground the women's narratives, allowing them to speak for themselves with no disruption and minimal analysis from myself except for at the beginning and end. So often, Black women's words are twisted and turned to portray a certain kind of image.

<div align="right">167</div>

But I want their thoughts, opinions, and hopes to be able to just exist, as it's so rare for Black women to just exist as themselves in a society that's constantly scrutinizing them and their behaviors and attitudes.

The Black women in my study reject the perceived "natural superiority of Black men" and their supposed "rightful" role as dominant (hooks 2004). hooks also asserts that "most Black men are not looking for a woman who is a peer: they want a woman who is traditionally feminine as defined by sexist thinking, who subordinates her will to his, who lives to please him" (hooks 2004:120). While previously Black women have submitted to the will of Black men for the betterment of the Black community in terms of upward mobility and racial liberation, they're at a place now where they refuse to acquiesce anymore. They're extremely open and vulnerable about their desire for the return of traditional dating, many of them stating that this idea has all but gone out of the window. They openly acknowledge that they want to be asked out on dates, treated with respect, and celebrated as Black women. So now, let's take a peek into Black collegiate women's wants, needs, and desires:

> "And I do want a relationship…what I'm looking for is like anybody, really. I mean, I would like them to be Black. And like in my mind, like, I think I'm like, I think I like men more, but like I'm just looking for somebody that like appreciates Black women, you know what I mean? And like everything about me, like my aesthetically Black characteristics, like somebody that's social justice [oriented] that's like, nice, respectful you know what I mean? So like, that's what I'm looking for, somebody to just really sweep me off my feet (laughs)."
> **-Terry, 21, single**

> "I guess it like, makes me look for someone that's kind of on my level. Like, I wouldn't go after like, say another person, like, who's African American, but they don't feel as strong about their race as I do…I don't want you looking at me like, I'm the stereotypical black woman, right? Like, 'why you have to cause a scene?' *No*, you have to understand that I was just disrespected, and now I have to act not only as an African-

American but stand up because I am a woman. I have *two* roles that I'm factoring in. So I have to actually have somebody who's on my level and is gonna, you know, understand, reciprocate, like the same things."

**-Susanne, 19, single**

"Somebody who just respects that identity [of being a Black woman] and somebody very much so aware of like, my needs as a Black woman, you know, and understanding like, my emotional needs, being just appreciative of my heritage and everything. And I think that's where, like, my desire to be with a Black man comes from is because he gets that. He has a mom, he has a sister, you know, he has cousins, he has aunts that he can identify with and, you know, and that's, I think that's my biggest argument to Black men when they say 'I don't like Black women' or they like bash Black women…so I think it's just important to respect that…and if you offend a Black woman, you're offending me."

**-Amber, 20, single**

"But I also don't see a lot of black women in relationships on campus…and that's like, it's hurtful. Not that because I'm like, 'Man, if that beautiful melanin ray of sunshine can't get a man then I can't get a man.' But it's hurtful, because it's like, Black women are constantly bettering themselves, they're going to college at higher rates, they're getting degrees, they are shattering like every obstacle. And yet, the one thing that is probably the hardest for Black…is to like, find significant others… you're like, overcoming these barriers. And then this small, little minute detail of relationships? And that poses one of the most visible barriers to you. It's awful! Because like, dating should be the easy part."

**-Jada, 21, single**

"Um, somebody who has goals, um, somebody who is doing something, you know. Um, I don't really like guys, I'm not attracted to guys who just, you know, play video games all day and like not do anything. So yeah, somebody who definitely knows what they want and is working towards what they want. Um, as far as religion, I'm, I mean, I grew up in the church, but I don't know, I kinda struggle with that, I don't, I don't think I'm religious, but I definitely like do believe in God and like, you know, that type of stuff, so somebody who's kinda the same."

**-Paulina, 19, single**

As we can see, Black women know exactly what it is that they want and are insistent in their refusal to accept anything other than what they feel they deserve. Despite their various issues with Black men, they still the ones that heterosexual Black

women want to love and commit to; they desire someone who's able commiserate with them not only as being Black, but as being Black women.

For both Black women *and* Black men to get what they truly want, they need to engage in a process of healing together. As a society, we cannot take the consequences of centuries of racist, sexist, classist, and homophobic oppression on the Black community lightly. If nothing else, I hope that this dissertation has shown how history continues to inform and affect the experiences of Black men and women today. Until the Black community as a collective confronts *all* systems of oppression that affect them, these issues will continue to cause fractures in the potential for a radical and progressive community based on support, love, and acceptance. I hope that this work helps contribute to this process of healing, because it is possible to hook up while being down with the cause.

## <u>Conclusion</u>

This chapter examined how the concept of Black sexual politics informs the sexual and romantic experiences of Black college students. I explore how the current state of Black gender ideology causes Black women to redefine their attitudes towards intimate relationships due to perceptions of Black masculinity as reticent and observations and experiences of misogynoir from Black men. Current racialized standards of beauty continue to be influenced by persistence of class, colorism, and bodily shape that further affect Black women's impressions of how Black men perceive their attractiveness. The culmination of these experiences results in the development of a Black feminist consciousness wherein Black women resist gendered norms and reassert power by demanding respectful, equitable relationships and choosing to focus on

themselves and their educational and career aspirations before pursuing relationships. I conclude by focusing on what the Black women in my study express that they desire and deserve in romantic and sexual relationships, highlighting narratives that are often overlooked and neglected. I argue that unless these issues are directly addressed within the community, they will continue to bolster the tense relationship between and amongst Black men and women that hinders possibilities for progressive and radical racial solidarity.

The closing chapter will summarize the main findings of my dissertation as they've been described and analyzed in empirical chapters 1, 2, and 3. I will also briefly discuss the contributions of this research to the sociological literature on higher education gender and sexuality studies and Black studies, limitations within my study that I urge scholars to undertake, and implications that my study has for future research on related topics. I conclude by reflecting on my personal experience with conducting this research and its impact on my relationship to the subject.

# CONCLUSION: THE POTENTIAL FATE OF BLACK COLLEGIATE SEXUAL LIFE

## <u>Contributions</u>

The preceding chapters have examined in various ways how the politics of space, race, gender, sexuality, and class inform Black undergraduate students' navigation of dating and hookup culture at a predominantly white institution. While this topic may seem inconsequential in comparison to the significant issues of racism that Black students face at PWIs (Jones and Reddick 2017), the recently popularized subject of collegiate hookup culture as a site of study has illustrated social issues related to gender and class inequality, heterosexism and homophobia, and sexual assault, amongst others (Grigoriadis 2019; Bogle 2008; Wade 2017; Freitas 2013; Paul 2022).

Racism emerged as another significant social issue affecting the configuration of hookup culture within my study that was generally overlooked in prior research. Chapter 1 illustrates this finding by examining how white students create racial parameters on campus through racist behaviors such as objectification, ostracism, and fetishization that affect Black students' perceptions of white sexual behaviors and attitudes towards interracial dating. Another valuable component of this literature has been the discovery of the increasing integration of hookup culture with campus social life has affected the social organization of higher education over time (Bogle 2008; Hamilton and Armstrong 2013; Wade 2017). And yet, it's also exemplified the need for more intersectional methodological approaches to college dating and hookup culture, as researchers continue

to focus their attention on white, cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class students' experiences, behaviors, and perspectives (Williams and Harper 2014).

Chapter 2 utilizes an intersectional lens to describe how Black students create their own social and cultural spaces on campus through the notion of racial solidarity, and how the politics of race, gender, class, and sexuality affect the affiliation of Black campus social life with dating and hookup culture. Students of color within larger studies are often depicted as avoidant and critical of hooking up due to their race, with the discourse of respectability politics commonly painted as the culprit, while lack of critical attention is paid to other racial, gendered, or classed politics that may affect their perspectives or behaviors. I argue that this rhetoric inadvertently contributes to the social narrative that Black people's attitudes toward sexuality tend to be dichotomous, wherein sexual behaviors are perceived as either respectable or promiscuous without much room for nuance (White 2001)[27].

Chapter 3 directly addresses these concerns by examining how perceptions of Black femininity and Black masculinity associated with Black sexual politics and respectability politics affect Black students' sexual and romantic attitudes, behaviors, and experiences. Overall, these powerfully descriptive narratives depict a complex Black gender ideology influenced by standards of beauty, gender and sexual stereotypes that affect the nature of Black relationships. And yet, these narratives also reveal the use of resilience, sexual agency, and social awareness in the face of these adversities. So often Blackness is associated with hardship and suffering, rather than fortitude and optimism; I

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[27] I recognize that the lack of analytical attention paid to students of color's experiences within larger studies on hookup culture is due in part to the lack of access to communities of color by white researchers, as well as the small student of color populations typically found at larger universities (Naaeke et. al. 2010).

sought to leave room for both in this research, to capture elements of both sorrow and joy. But in my opinion, the most important aspect of this research is that it aids in the articulation of historically silenced voices and experiences that, through lack of recognition and concern, have been rendered insignificant for far too long; and we cannot know how to address or rectify these issues if we don't even acknowledge them.

My intentional focus on the relationship between race and space can be used to further our understanding of the potential ways that hookup culture can be structured and organized with literature on the subject. Matters of ownership, property, and domination have a clear effect on how students, dependent upon their social location, learn to maneuver romantic and sexual situations. This allows us to see how Black students create their own romantic and sexual meanings, as well as how these meanings affect how they view Black relationships and interact with one another. By getting a glimpse into how the different intersections at play impact students' understanding of Black sexuality, we are better able to see how these social situations can be reflective of power dynamics and hierarchal structures present within the broader white supremacist, capitalist, heteronormative patriarchal society in which we live (Onwuachi-Willig 2006). I hope that the knowledge gained from my research influences and urges scholars to be more critical of the ways in which unmarked categories of identity, such as whiteness and heterosexuality, inform their exploration and analysis of college social and sexual life (Brekhus 1998). There are many pieces to the puzzle of hookup culture; it requires a collective effort to find and put them all together.

**Limitations**

While my research is beneficial in many ways to our understanding of Black college students 'romantic and sexual experiences, there are some limitations to my methodological approach. The COVID-19 pandemic that begin in March of 2020, two months after I started my data collection, greatly affected the course of my initial research plan. One original aspect of this agenda was to do a comparative study between Black students at a predominantly white institution and a historically Black college in the Midwest. As I hope to have illustrated in Chapters 1 and 2, the relationship between race and space has been historically significant in affecting college students' behaviors and interactions. Due to the emphasis on racial solidarity in the development of these institutions, HBCUs have long been perceived as social nuclei for the vitality and celebration of Black culture and community (Bettez and Suggs 2010). As such, I was interested in comparing how the potential for dating and hooking up may operate differently in these spaces regarding a more populous, formally established Black community that exists independently of white space in contrast to a smaller, more informally established Black community that exists within a white dominated space. However, I made the decision to limit the scope of my research to focus solely on students at a PWI after my failure to recruit at the nearest HBCU, although there is a definite need for more research on Black students' social experiences at these institutions. The coordinator of a meeting I observed that focused on women of color's experiences with dating and hookup culture mentioned that a significant motivation for her to attend an HBCU for her undergraduate degree was to have a larger pool for potential partners. While she did manage to find her future husband there, she also noted that she had similar experiences as the women with misogynistic displays of Black masculinity within

the Black Greek organizations' scene on campus…twenty years prior. I believe that the persistence in these behaviors and attitudes points to larger theoretical and conceptual meanings of Black gender ideology and how they can potentially transgress space. This needs to be further investigated to better understand how ideologies around Blackness, sexuality, and gender affect higher educational experiences at large, and how while space may indeed change, some of the ideas, behaviors, and interactions can remain the same.

Another original component of my research plan was to equally include both Black women and Black men. Despite my many efforts to recruit Black men to participate in the interview process, I was unable to get more than two to agree. Because of this, I was unable to accurately thematize or generalize their experiences based on this limited sample. Though I can't say for certain, I believe this is partly due to a lack of gender relatability, in that my identity as a Black womyn may have caused them to feel uncomfortable sharing personal experiences and thoughts about sensitive issues such as gender and sexuality Apparently, this is not an isolated incident-Black men are often reluctant to interview within research on health due to struggles with engaging in emotional expression for prolonged periods of time (Affleck et. al. 2012). These scholars suggest that researchers utilize other qualitative methods, such as photo-based ones, to provide alternate, non-verbal opportunities for Black men to express themselves.  While there is a multitude of literature on Black men's academic and social engagement within higher education due to their historical barriers to obtaining undergraduate degrees, there is not much on their experiences with dating and sex. We *need* these voices and perspectives to procure a more comprehensive picture of the structure of Black collegiate hookup culture, and how Black men play a role in its composition. Hopefully, scholars

will look to advance this small facet of research as hookup culture continues to gain popularity within studies on sexuality.

My final limitation is the shortage of Black LGBQ[28] students' narratives within my findings and analysis. Even though they were explicitly asked about and shared their experiences as non-heterosexual Black students, they generally spoke in heteronormative ways throughout the duration of the interview. I found this to be a significant observation in support of other scholars' assertions that hookup culture is heteronormative in nature and generally unwelcoming to queer students (Bogle 2008; Freitas 2013; Wade 2017). In their study of LGBTQ students, Lamont et. al (2018) found that these students challenge dominant heterosexual hookup culture through various means by emphasizing consent, prioritizing pleasure, and deconstructing gender and sexual norms; however, the racial makeup of this study is predominantly white. Research that focuses specifically on Black queer students 'experiences with dating and hooking up will be crucial to furthering our understanding of hookup culture because their relationship with race and gender is historically and markedly different from heterosexual Black youth (Love 2017). Black LGBQ folks have faced discrimination and exclusion from both the Black and queer communities, further marginalizing their efforts to grapple with these significant aspects of their identity (Pender and Riddick 2018); their experiences are worthy of much more consideration and scrutiny than they've been given. Regarding gender identity, for the purposes of this study I chose to focus on cisgender Black men and women who identify

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[28] Interestingly, none of my non-heterosexual participants identified as strictly gay or lesbian, only bisexual or queer. Those narratives would likely have provided a distinctly different viewpoint on queer identity, dating, and hookup culture.

within the gender binary of 'man' and 'woman'[29]. I did this not as an exclusionary practice, but as an acknowledgement of Black transgender students' uniquely marginal status that I believe necessitates unequivocal attention, which was beyond the scope of this project. To adequately research the complexity of their relationship with race, gender identity, and sexuality would require an expansively separate study, which is urgently needed considering the severely minimal literature on Black transgender students' social experiences in college, let alone with dating and hooking up (Somerville 2000; Nicolazzo 2016). Black LGBTQ students are just as integral to understandings and constructions of race, gender, and sexuality as their cisgender and heterosexual counterparts, and so their voices and perspectives deserve just as much recognition and respect.

## **Implications**

My study has several sociological implications for future research within disciplines such as higher education, gender and sexuality studies, and Black studies that focus on topics related to dating and hooking up. Though just as importantly, it has implications for our collective understanding as a society of what campus life looks like for Black students socially, romantically, and sexually. The knowledge gained from this research can be used in various ways to better the lives of *all* college students, not just those who are Black; the culture of campus life has and will continue to shift, and universities need to be more intentional about adjusting to these changes for the sexual, social, and romantic well-being of students. These different insights help us in recognizing the significance of the relationship between identity, structure, and culture, and how this relationship consequently informs behavioral practices. Sexuality is more

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[29] I chose to address gender identity separately so as not to contribute to its frequent conflation with sexual orientation, as these are discrete identities with distinct experiences.

than just a consequence of biological forces; it is a system of ideas and practices that are embedded in our social structures in various ways, somehow being both visible and invisible in its capacity (Fausto-Sterling 2000; Hill Collins 2004). As such, it affects our everyday behavior and interaction with one another, largely shaping the different social forces that drive inequality. By considering the oppressive structure of higher education, we see how it becomes another site in which to explore the role that sexuality plays in upholding systems of power that affect marginalized groups' experiences. To better grasp the complex politics of gender, class, and race that affect the Black community's relationship with sexuality, we must remember that silence has never truly served us, nor has the use of shame ever truly liberated us (Hammonds 1997). To assist in the dismantling and unlearning of these oppressive ideologies, we must initiate these dialogues with benevolence and open-mindedness, or hookup culture will continue to exist as it does currently: generally unsatisfying, unfulfilling, and undesirable to most students (Freitas 2013).

For the last and final portion of my dissertation, I'd like to be forthright about the role of social positionality and briefly discuss my personal reflexive experience with the nature of this research (Dowling 2006). As a cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class, plus-sized, brown-skinned Black radical feminist womyn, engaging in this work has been so meaningful and impactful to my own individual exploration of the sexual and romantic aspect of Black womxnhood; and through the process of data collection, I felt the importance of every single one of these aspects in relation to my own experiences with both privilege and oppression. Many of the experiences, thoughts, and feelings that the women shared with me felt personal to my own past, and current, ordeals, and at times

was emotionally and mentally difficult to manage as I continued with the process of data collection. As a fellow Black womyn, I sensed that they felt more comfortable sharing intimate aspects of their private lives with me, and as I sifted through the data, I realized that I had created a safe space for these women to talk about their emotions, concerns, and aspirations in a manner that I don't think is often available to them, especially at PWIs (Jones and Reddick 2017). What I also realized, though, is that these interviews served as a safe space for *me*, both as a researcher and an individual. They allowed for the women and I to build kinship with one another over shared aspects of our identities and experiences, but also forced me to acknowledge and examine my own biases and advantages when these aspects differed. This journey has strengthened my pride in being a Black womyn and served as a reminder of how much I admire and respect Black womxn, not only those in my study, but everywhere; we as a society owe so much to them. As the iconic Audre Lorde once said:

> *Women are powerful and dangerous.*

# APPENDIX A: PRELIMINARY DATA INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (2016-2017)

1. How would you identify yourself? What parts of your identity are most important to you?
2. How strongly do you identify with your race?

3. How strongly do you identify with your gender?
4. How strongly do you identify with your sexuality?
5. Are you currently single or in a relationship? What are you looking for right now?
6. What do you look for in a partner or casual partner?
7. What is it like dating here at Mizzou?
8. What have you noticed about interracial dating? Would you interracially date?
9. How do you usually go about dating here? What is your experience usually like?
10. What have you noticed with other people? What are single people like? What are people in relationships like?
11. How does your identity impact how you date?
12. Are there standards of beauty you think you need to adhere to?
13. Do you feel a pressure to find someone in college?
14. What's the most significant thing you've experienced during your dating experiences?

# APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (2020-2022)

1. How would you identify yourself? What parts of your identity are most important to you?

2. How strongly do you identify with your race?
3. How strongly do you identify with your gender?
4. How strongly do you identify with your sexuality?
5. Are you currently single or in a relationship? If single, are you looking for a relationship, and if so, what are you looking for in a relationship? If in a relationship, what does that look like for you?
6. How would you define dating?
7. How would you define 'hooking up'?
8. How do you differentiate between the two?
9. Would you say there's a hookup culture on campus? If so, how would you describe it?
10. In your opinion, is there a hookup culture that operates within the Black community? The white community? Are there any differences?
11. Do you think there are certain standards of beauty, cultural differences, or stereotypes that affect Black men/women within hookup culture?
12. What role does technology/social media/virtual space play within hookup culture, if at all?
13. How does your identity as a Black man or woman impact how you navigate hookup culture? How do you thinking being a student at a PWI impacts your experience?
14. Do you think hooking up has taken over traditional dating in college? Why or why not?
15. What's the most significant thing you've experienced or observed with hookup culture?

# APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

| NAME | PRONOUNS | AGE | YEAR IN SCHOOL | SEXUAL ORIENTATION | RELATIONSHIP STATUS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **SPENCER** | He/him | 22 | Senior | Heterosexual | In a relationship |
| **IAN** | He/him | 20 | Sophomore | Heterosexual | In a relationship |
| **MIMI** | She/her | 19 | Sophomore | Heterosexual | Single |
| **LIZZY** | She/her | 20 | Junior | Heterosexual | Single |
| **LILY** | She/her | 20 | Junior | Heterosexual | Single |
| **ELENA** | She/her | 21 | Senior | Heterosexual | Single, dating someone exclusively |
| **HARRY** | She/her | 21 | Senior | Heterosexual | Single |
| **BRIANNA** | She/her | 18 | Freshman | Bisexual | Single |
| **BISA** | She/her | 20 | Senior | Non-identification | In a relationship |
| **VICTORIA** | She/her | 19 | Sophomore | Heterosexual | Single |
| **DIANA** | She/her | 20 | Sophomore | Heterosexual | Single |
| **BLAIR** | She/her | 19 | Freshman | Heterosexual | In a relationship, complicated |
| **MADELINE** | She/her | 20 | Junior | Heterosexual | Single |
| **MAYA** | She/her | 19 | Freshman | Heterosexual | In a relationship |
| **PAULINA** | She/her | 19 | Sophomore | Heterosexual | Single |
| **KELLY** | She/her | 21 | Junior | Queer | Single |
| **TERRY** | She/her | 21 | Junior | Non-identification | Single |
| **SUSANNE** | She/her | 19 | Sophomore | Heterosexual | Single |
| **JENAE** | She/her | 20 | Sophomore | Heterosexual | In a relationship, long distance |
| **AVERY** | She/her | 20 | Sophomore | Heterosexual | In a relationship, long distance |
| **LEA** | She/her | 19 | Sophomore | Heterosexual | Single |
| **JADA** | She/her | 21 | Junior | Heterosexual | Single |
| **CASSIE** | She/her | 19 | Sophomore | Heterosexual | In a relationship, complicated |
| **KINA** | She/her | 19 | Sophomore | Heterosexual | In a relationship, long distance |
| **AMBER** | She/her | 20 | Sophomore | Heterosexual | Single |

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## VITA

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