

Chapter 5

Some Notes on the History of Black Sexuality in the United States*John P. Elia*

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"African American experience simultaneously reflects the problems faced by other groups of oppressed people; yet, it is also a unique history that must be explained in its own right"
– Patricia Hill Collins (2004)¹

"The pathologizing of Black sexuality continued as means of affirming the superior status of Europeans while restricting the social movement of Black people by characterizing egalitarian interaction with them as undesirable"
– Kevin McGruder (2010)²

INTRODUCTION

Negative attitudes about sexual matters have persisted for centuries in the Western world. There has been a history of sex negativity, misinformation about sexuality, sexual injustice, and myths surrounding sexuality. The history of sexuality reveals that these negative attitudes, myths, and forms of misinformation have not been innocuous. People have been disproportionately harmed as a result. This chapter is intended to be a general historical overview of the topic, covering enduring themes and patterns that have persisted through much of U.S. history, rather than a narrow focus on a particular sexual topic or historical period.

¹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York & London: Routledge, 2004), 13.

² Kevin McGruder, "Pathologizing Black Sexuality: The U.S. Experience," In *Black Sexualities: Probing Powers, Passions, Practices, and Policies*, eds. Juan Battle and Sandra L. Barnes (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 104.

Black sexuality has received a fair amount of scholarly attention by historians and cultural studies scholars over the past several years. What has resulted is a body of literature that paints a clear picture about how not only preoccupied American culture has been with sexual matters, but an even greater intensity has been generated about Black sexuality. Ample historical evidence makes clear just how suspect Black sexuality has been portrayed and treated. These prevailing negative attitudes about Black people generally and their sexuality more specifically originated when Europeans came into contact with African people several centuries ago prior to chattel slavery in North America.

BLACK SEXUALITY AND ORIGINS OF DISCRIMINATION

The definitions of what constitutes a Black person or a Black community are deeply nuanced and can vary and be interpreted in a number of different ways. For example, some peoples from the Caribbean and Latin America are considered to be Black. Moreover, a “transnational Black consciousness”³ extends beyond any monolithic understanding of Blackness. Also, individuals from a variety of ethnic backgrounds identify as Black. In this chapter, however, the term “Black people” refers to those individuals in the United States who are of African descent. Twinet Parmer and James Gordon describe Black sexuality as “a collective cultural expression of the multiple identities as sexual beings of a group of Africans in America, who share a slave history that over time has strongly shaped the Black experiences in White America.”⁴ There has been a more pronounced focus on Black sexuality than on the sexuality of other ethnic groups. Sharon Rachel and Christian Thrasher note that “[t]here is no discourse on

³ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *Black in Latin America* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 9.

⁴ Twinet Parmer and James A. Gordon, “Cultural Influences on African American Sexuality: The Role of Multiple Identities on Kinship, Power, and Ideology,” In *Sexual Health, Volume 3, Moral and Cultural Foundations*, eds. Mitchell S. Tepper and Annette Fuglsang Owens (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007), 175.

'White' sexuality, 'Jewish' sexuality, 'Native American' sexuality, etc."⁵ Even though there is not much work to speak of that focuses on "White" heterosexuality *per se* in the ways in which the discourse on Black sexuality has been created, it is safe to say that the dominant discourse about sexuality centers and normalizes White sexuality in general and is grounded in dominant cultural terms. It is also important to note that there has been pushback to de-center Whiteness. Counternarratives have been produced that question and interrogate the backdrop of Whiteness that has been used to normalize White hegemonic sexuality on the one hand and at the same time degrade Black sexuality on the other hand. Black sexuality has historically been negatively judged against a particular kind of White sexual norms: "[t]he pathologizing of Black sexuality continued as means of affirming the superior status of Europeans while restricting the social movement of Black people by characterizing egalitarian interaction with them as undesirable."⁶

Perhaps one of the most poignant and foundational examples of debasing the female Black body with a particular emphasis on big breasts, buttocks, and other sexual body parts occurred in the early nineteenth century with the European obsession with a woman named Saartjie Baartman (1789-1815). Also known as "The Hottentot Venus," Baartman was a Khoikhoi woman originally from southwest Africa. Essentially, Baartman was taken from her homeland in Africa to Europe, where she was put on exhibit for public viewings in England and France from 1810 until her death.⁷ Such a display of Baartman's body was certainly a way of "Othering" her Black body, especially compared with White European women. Exhibiting Baartman was both a way of showing various aspects of Black sexuality as well as making her a spectacle. Her years on exhibition constituted more of an ongoing "freak show" than honoring Baartman or her body in any way. Magdalena Barrera has noted that "When the [public] paid to see

⁵ Sharon Rachel and Christian Thrasher. "A History of 'Black' Sexuality in the United States: From Preslavery to the Era of HIV/AIDS to a Vision of HOPE for the Future." (Washington, DC: American Public Health Association, 2015), para 5.

⁶ McGruder, "Pathologizing Black Sexuality: The U.S. Experience," 104.

⁷ Sadiyah Qureshi, "Displaying Sara Baartman, the 'Hottentot Venus'," *History of Science* 42, no. 2 (2004): 235.

her 'perform'—she was held in a cage and made to dance half-naked in order to receive any food...People were so perplexed upon seeing her that they debated whether she was even human."⁸ Following her death in 1815, Baartman's image remained on display in the form of a plaster cast of her body at the *Musée de l'Homme* in Paris, France, and her sexual body parts were preserved and kept on display until the 1970s.⁹ It was not until 2002 that Saartjie Baartman's bodily remains were returned to her homeland in South Africa for a proper, respectful, and humane burial based on an arrangement made by South African President Nelson Mandela with the French government.¹⁰ The Baartman story illustrates the exoticization of the Black female body, which reified and perpetuated the Western notion of Blackness and linked it to being less than human, lascivious, and non-normative.

SETTING THE STAGE FOR NEGATIVE ATTITUDES ABOUT BLACK SEXUALITY

While the Baartman story provides a single example of the characterization of Black sexuality, it fits with a larger picture of the construction of race that pre-dates Baartman being put on display in Europe. Europeans formed their views of Black people as far back as the sixteenth century. When Europeans came into contact with Africans and witnessed how they interacted sexually with other Africans and non-African individuals as well as the degree to which Africans were clothed, negative attitudes were formed about African sexuality. Historian Kevin McGruder (2010) further states that "[t]he limited apparel worn by most Africans was interpreted by Europeans as a sign of lasciviousness or lack of modesty rather than a concession to the tropical climate. Linked to this impression was a perception that the sex drives of Africans were uncontrollable."¹¹ Even more insidious was the suggestion that African people were less

⁸ Magdalena Berrera, "Hottentot 2000: Jennifer Lopez and Her Butt," In *Sexualities in History: A Reader*, eds. Kim M. Phillips and Barry Reay (New York: Routledge, 2002), 410.

⁹ Rachel and Thrasher, "Black Sexuality in the United States," para 7.

¹⁰ Qureshi, "Displaying Sara Baartman, the 'Hottentot Venus,'" 233.

¹¹ McGruder, "Pathologizing Black Sexuality: The U.S. Experience," 104.

than human, even to the extent of their being animalized.¹² This portrayal of African people by Europeans continued for the duration not only of chattel slavery in the American South from 1619 to 1863, but also long after slavery ended into the Jim Crow Era and beyond. Another factor that influenced and perpetuated racist ideologies that concerned both sexual and non-sexual aspects of Black people involved scientific racism that was prominent from the 1600s until the end of World War II (now regarded as pseudo-science and thoroughly disregarded as nonsense). Among the academic and professional fields that practiced scientific racism were anthropology, biological sciences, medicine, and so on in Europe and the United States. A description of Black people from this perspective was written by the nineteenth-century French naturalist and zoologist Georges Cuvier, the same individual who dissected and preserved Baartman's sexual body parts, appeared in his book *The Animal Kingdom: Arranged in Conformity with Its Organization* (1817). Among many other topics, Cuvier covered the varieties of the human species. In part, he wrote, "The Negro race is confined to the south of mount Atlas; it is marked by a Black complexion; crisp or woolly hair, compressed cranium, and a flat nose. The projection of the lower parts of the face, and the thick lips, evidently appropriate it to the monkey tribe; the hordes of which it consists have always remained in the most complete state of barbarism."¹³ Such a description is not only generally dehumanizing but the likening of people of African descent to animals extends to attitudes about their sexuality. Such attitudes deriving from the observations of African people by Europeans when they first visited Africa in the sixteenth century coupled with the racist pseudo-science that was characterized by Cuvier's claims above, in part, provided a rationale for enslaving people of African

¹² A number of scholarly works comment on the extent to which Africans were likened to animals. See, for example, Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*, 55, David Brion Davis, "Constructing Race: A Reflection." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (1997): 9-10. doi:10.2307/2953310, and Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press), 231 and *passim*.

¹³ Georges Cuvier. *The Animal Kingdom: Arranged in Conformity with its Organization* (New York: G. & C. & H. Carvill, 1833), 50.

descent in North America, and particularly what would become the Southern states of the U.S.

BLACK SEXUALITY DURING SLAVERY

While it is clear that prior to slavery, "The Peculiar Institution," Europeans did much to cement the idea that Blacks were inferior to Whites, and therefore "the color lines" were drawn and racist ideologies became the norm. Even so, plenty of historical evidence confirms that interracial sexual relationships took place between Blacks and Whites. Such sexual liaisons, however, would become increasingly socially unacceptable particularly as mixed-race children who resulted from such unions challenged both racial hierarchy and the institution of slavery itself. Therefore, as slavery became more established, there was more of an effort to curb social and sexual relations between Black and White individuals. For example, if an enslaved Black man and a White woman had children, these offspring would be free and violate the "slavery for life" tenet¹⁴ and blur racial lines that served to justify slavery and ensure its continuation. The dangers of cavorting with White women were made very clear to Black men. If Black men were discovered carrying on sexually with White women, it could prove to be catastrophic for these men. Likewise, White women were warned of the negative and damning impact on their reputations if their sexual relations with Black men were to be discovered. McGruder put it best by asserting, "Interracial sexual activity became increasingly problematic because it could result in biracial children whose very presence challenged the separate social spheres as well as the institution of slavery."¹⁵

Chattel slavery in the United States reveals much about the history of sexuality concerning Black people for over two centuries in which slavery was legal. As we know, slavery served to reinforce the racial divide and to perpetuate the racist notion that Black people were essentially animals. Even though there was a well-entrenched general belief of the inferiority of Black people by White Americans and Europeans and therefore a generalized disapproval of interracial sexual relations, many instances of

¹⁴ McGruder, "Pathologizing Black Sexuality: The U.S. Experience," 105.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 105.

interracial sex—both consensual and non-consensual—took place. It was not uncommon for slave women to have sexual interactions with masters for a number of reasons. According to one historical account, “Some slave women responded to material incentives like food, clothing, and better housing that White men offered in exchange for sexual favors. Certainly, they were much more able than slave suitors to ‘romance’ slave women with gifts and promises of a better life.”¹⁶ And, in some cases emancipation was promised and occasionally realized. In some cases, slave women were bought and sold with the main purpose of serving as concubines.¹⁷ However, while there were surely individual cases in which mutual sexual attraction and affection between enslaved women and White men existed, the power differential was inherently problematic. In the overwhelming majority of instances, Black female bodies were commodified, and these women lacked control over their bodies in a variety of ways, ranging from not being able to freely choose to abstain from sexual activity and not having the freedom to select a mate, to not having a choice about whether or not to produce children. Although slaves often valued sexual and romantic attachments and family, much of the time such relationships were tenuous at best, and often romantic relationships were interrupted if not destroyed due to slaves being sold and therefore relocated. Thus, any family unit created within such a relationship destabilized.

There were innumerable documented cases, for example, in which male masters raped female slaves. As a matter of fact, bondswomen were required to “live with males of their own race, but were also forced to have sexual relations with White men,” and the women had no say in the matter because “planters’ desires, not those of slaves, were responsible for this increase in the mulatto population, though some females

¹⁶ Brenda E. Stevenson, “Slave Marriage and Family Relations in Antebellum Virginia,” in *Slavery and Emancipation*, eds. Rick Halpern and Enrico Dal Lago (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 253-54.

¹⁷ Skylar Mamrak, “Victims of Lust and Hate: Master and Slave Sexual Relations in Antebellum United States.” *Valley Humanities Review* (Spring 2016): 7.

willingly mixed their blood with that of White males.”¹⁸ In fact, most often the sex between White men and Black women involved rape by masters and other White men.¹⁹ Sexual exploitation by White men was justified because Black women’s sexuality was viewed as animalistic—as a sexual turn-on by many White men—and perpetuated the sexual abuse of slave women. The by-products of these forms of sexual violence included harm—both physical and psychological—to these women, biracial children, and the emasculation of enslaved suitors who witnessed these sheer abuses of power by the White masters and were powerless to do anything about it. Slave women were reminded on a regular basis that they had little to no control over their bodies. Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins indicates, “Institutionalized rape, a form of sexual violence whose aim is to dominate or control its female (and male) victims, permeated chattel slavery. Rape served the specific purpose of political and/or economic domination of enslaved African women, and by extension, African Americans as a collectivity.”²⁰ One of the more famous examples of an interracial relationship in the U.S. is the lifelong relationship between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. After Jefferson made Hemings his concubine in Paris, she refused to return to the U.S. because she was free in France. According to an interview with their son Madison Hemings, Jefferson coerced Hemings into returning with him by “promis[ing] her extraordinary privileges, and made a solemn pledge that her children should be free at the age of twenty-one years.”²¹ Hemings, like so many other female slaves, had no

¹⁸ Thelma Jennings, “Us Colored Women Had to Go Through A Plenty: Sexual Exploitation of African-American Slave Women.” *Journal of Women’s History* 1, no. 3 (1990): 60.

¹⁹ Martha Hodes, *White Women and Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth Century South* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 3.

²⁰ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, 58.

²¹ Madison Hemings, “The Memoirs of Madison Hemings.” <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/jefferson/cron/1873march.html> (1873), para 3.

agency in her enslaved status and chose to give her children freedom rather than to claim her own liberty.

Many female slaves experienced sexual trauma and lacked control over their bodies, and although gender dynamics were different, male slaves had similar experiences. Masters viewed Black males as sexually libidinous and animalistic with raw and unbridled carnal desire. Essentially, Black men and women were put into the same basic category. The main difference is that Black male sexuality was feared, primarily based on potential sexual interactions between Black males and White women. The origin of White men's fears was multifaceted. Such relations could produce biracial children, which would blur the "color lines." Another factor concerned insecurity of the White men about their own sexual prowess. Would male slaves outperform their White masters on the sexual front? Winthrop Jordan addresses such potential fears and anxieties of masters by stating "[W]hite men anxious over their own sexual inadequacy were touched by a racking fear and jealousy. Perhaps the Negro better performed his nocturnal offices than the White man. Perhaps, indeed, the White man's woman really wanted the Negro more than she wanted him."²² There was much talk about the sexual endowment of Black men. If Black males were sexual with White women, the repercussions were usually proportionate to the social standing and socioeconomic class of White women. The higher the status of the woman, the more dire consequences for the male slave, and the more the woman had to lose regarding her standing in her community. Additionally, elite White women were considered "pure," and to be sexually "defiled" by especially a Black man was viewed as highly problematic and therefore dangerous.²³ These scenarios would not be the only precarious position in which Black males would find themselves, sexually speaking.

Sexual abuse of male slaves was yet another problem. Much like the abuse of female slaves, male slaves were sexually abused by not only their masters, but also by

²²Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812*,

Second Edition, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1968/2012): 152.

²³ Martha Hodes, *White Women and Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth Century South*, 5.

White women as well. One form of the abuse was that Black men were often forced to “breed.” Some masters would identify a strong, well-built male to copulate with a specific female slave, who would provide ideal offspring for the business of slave labor. In some cases, male masters would watch the male and female have intercourse to ensure that mating happened. It is well documented that masters would “hire out” their male slaves who would likely produce healthy offspring. These men were forced to have sexual intercourse with several women in a short period of time and who to father numerous children. One documented case details how a male slave was required to impregnate approximately fifteen women and subsequently fathered dozens of offspring.²⁴

Notably, such forced sexual couplings have been written about from the perspective of the sexually violated woman, but rarely from the viewpoint of the abuse experienced by the male.²⁵ Besides being made to reproduce on command to a number of women, the other issue is that such a practice prevented and even foreclosed the male from knowing his children. It was common for slaves to not know who their fathers were. The main point is that such a breeding practice is inherently abusive to female as well as male slaves, and the toll this took on males needs to be more broadly recognized in the historical scholarship.

An equally egregious form of sexual abuse is the sexual assaults that male slaves had to endure. They were sexually abused and taken advantage of by White females and males alike. It is clear that White women had sexual relations with Black males; while some of these sexual relationships were based on affection, given the context of slavery and the taboo associated with Black and White sexual couplings, it could be easily argued that coercion was necessarily a component of such sexual liaisons. A paucity of scholarship exists on the sexual abuse of male slaves by White women. Historian Thomas Foster puts it best by stating, “Few scholars, however, have viewed

²⁴ Thomas Foster, “The Sexual Abuse of Black Men under American Slavery,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20, no. 3 (2011): 456.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 456.

the relationships of enslaved men and free White women through the lens of sexual abuse in part because of gendered assumptions about sexual power."²⁶ Black men were clearly in a precarious situation and therefore vulnerable to a whole host of punishments, including, but not limited to, being sold, beaten, whipped, castrated, genitally mutilated, to being killed. Besides White women's sexual coercion and abuse of Black male slaves, White masters would engage in same-sex sexual abuse. As with White women and male slaves, it is possible that some masters and bondsmen expressed affection for one another and therefore sexual activities between them would appear to be "consensual," this could hardly be possible given the power relations between masters and their slaves. More extreme examples of sexual abuse included masters being sexual with male slaves as a form of punishment and humiliation, and the most extreme of these acts involved the male slaves being sodomized.

Even though slaves' sexuality was largely controlled and impacted by slave owners, in their own right, slaves—depending on their living situations and the approach and sensibilities of individual slave owners—developed their own sexual customs and family culture. Overall, slaves did not have an issue with premarital sexuality activity. Even though slaves were not officially and legally able to marry, they had courtship rituals and engaged in commitment ceremonies. Historians John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman have noted, "As the property of their masters, slaves did not have the legal right to contract marriage, but they nevertheless performed marriage rituals ranging from jumping over a broomstick to Christian wedding ceremonies performed by Black or White preachers."²⁷ Some historians in the past downplayed the fact that slave culture had sexual mores and a commitment to marriage and/or the family unit.

POST SLAVERY: JIM CROW AND BLACK SEXUALITY

²⁶ *Ibid*, 459.

²⁷ John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988): 99.

The end of slavery ushered in an equally ominous era regarding Black sexuality. It is true that Black sexuality has been treated as uncivilized and suspect since Europeans came into contact with Africans. Before and during slavery both early American societal views and legal prohibitions against miscegenation varied quite a bit depending upon the historical period and geographical area. As time progressed, such sexual unions were widely discouraged and even widely prohibited by law. During slavery Black sexuality was largely controlled and dictated by slave owners. When slavery was outlawed and dismantled in the mid-1860s, Black sexuality was deeply feared more than ever before. More specifically, D'Emilio and Freedman indicate that "the dismantling of slavery initiated a new and terrifying era in Southern race relations in which sexuality became one of the central means of reasserting White social control over Blacks"²⁸ The postbellum era was an extraordinarily difficult time for Black Americans.

The attitudes and views of many White Americans about Black sexuality after chattel slavery ended were similar to those held during the more than two-hundred years of the institution of slavery. However, the animosity against Blacks by Whites was at an all-time high. A White supremacist organization, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), originally founded in 1865, paralleled with both the ending of slavery and the conclusion of the Civil War. By 1870 the KKK had infiltrated nearly every Southern state. This proliferation of the KKK was principally focused on protecting White women against the alleged sexual predation of Black men. It was common for the KKK to terrorize Black men, women, and children. Black men ran the risk of being lynched with even so much as a whisper that they violated White women's purity by having sex with them. Many of those who were prejudiced against interracial sex between Black men and White women viewed such sexual contact as *de facto* rape by Black men. The response of the KKK was swift and decisive: lynching, sexual assaults, and genital mutilations of Black men were frighteningly familiar in the American South. Patricia Hill Collins asserts that "Lynching and rape emerged as two interrelated, gender-specific forms of sexual

²⁸ Ibid, 104.

violence. Perceptions of Black hypersexuality occupied an increasingly prominent place in American science, popular culture, religious traditions, and state policies."²⁹ In fact, lynchings were the main form of sexual and social control and punishment: from 1889 to 1940 about 3,800 Black individuals were lynched.³⁰

Black men and women continued to be viewed as having unquenchable sexual appetites well into the twentieth century and such stereotypes often led to harm. It was common for such hypersexual images of Black men and women to be depicted in television programs, movies, and other visual representations.³¹ While Black men were targets of racialized violence including lynchings, women were subjected to sexual harassment and sexual assault by White men. The White imagination formed stereotypes of Black women as being sexually unrestrained, and this narrative gave White men license to do whatever they wanted to do sexually to these women. Specifically, as a holdover from the slavery period, the image developed of the Jezebel, a light-skinned Black woman who was purported to be lascivious and favored by White men. Such a sexualized image of the Jezebel was consistently portrayed in twentieth-century popular culture. For instance, sexualized images of these women were displayed in objectifying ways: "Everyday items—such as ashtrays, postcards, sheet music, fishing lures, drinking glasses, and so forth—depicted naked or scantily dressed Black women lacking modesty and sexual restraint."³² On the other end of the spectrum from the Jezebel is the stereotype of an asexual black mammy. The mammy is just as pervasive (if not more so) in American culture. She is the unfeminine, large, "faithful, obedient domestic servant," and while she can be "well loved" as White children's primary caregiver, she is asexual and unthreatening to the White family structure.

²⁹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, 63.

³⁰ John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 216, and John P. Elia, "Sexuality," in *The World of Jim Crow: Arts to Housing and Community* (Volume 1), ed. Steven A. Reich (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press, 2019), 210.

³¹ David Pilgrim, "The Jezebel Stereotype," <https://ferris.edu/jimcrow/jezebel/>, Accessed on August 10, 2019. 2002 (Last modified in 2012), para 14.

³² Ibid.

However, despite her obedience, if pushed past her limits of patience, the mammy figure could also “wield considerable authority” in the White family as well as in her own home.³³ Similar to the Jezebel, the mammy’s image harms Black women in the sense that White Southerners would argue that White men weren’t sexually attracted to black women, because they are mammies; however, if there were a sexual liaison, it was solely due to the Black woman’s status as a hypersexual Jezebel. A male corollary to the mammy figure is the “Uncle Tom,” based on the character from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The mention of an “Uncle Tom” conjures up images of “an old man who is meek, submissive, doesn’t stick up for himself, [and who is] desexualized.”³⁴ Unlike the powerful black male who struck fear of cuckoldry into white men’s hearts, the Uncle Tom is the pure embodiment of obedience, not to mention that he is entirely non-threatening to White men and therefore does not risk the wrath from which stronger Black men faced.

Even a cursory examination of how African Americans were viewed and treated regarding sexual matters reveals consistently racist and generally negative portrayals. The twentieth century was filled with examples—far too numerous to recount here given space limitations—that were not only prominent in the American South, but also throughout the United States. Besides depictions of Black women as barbaric, carnal, and overtly sexual on swizzle sticks, postcards, and other items found in daily life, other aspects of prejudice and disregard existed for African Americans. Three significant occurrences regarding sexual matters that had national attention were the film *Birth of a Nation*, the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, and the Emmett Till tragedy. These three examples show the widespread fear and exaggeration of Black sexuality.

Birth of a Nation is a well-known yet highly controversial film that was released in early 1915 and directed and co-produced by D.W. Griffith and Harry Aiken. It is based on a novel entitled *The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*

³³ Patricia Hill Collins. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990, pp. 71-72.

³⁴ Gregory M. Lamb, “What We’ve Made of Uncle Tom,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 29 October 2002 (vol. 94, no. 235): 17.

(1905) written by Thomas Dixon, Jr. Principally, *Birth of a Nation* focuses on the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln and the details of a relationship between a Northern family (the Stonemans) and a Southern family (the Camerons) during a segment of the Civil War and the Reconstruction periods. This film was controversial from its inception, and its history has been complicated not to mention its exaggerated treatment of Black sexuality. What is important to note, however, is that this film boldly reinforces negative stereotypes about Black people. It pictures Black males as simpletons who were sexually unrestrained toward White women. Part of the film pictures Mr. Stoneman's mistress, Lydia Brown, a jezebel, who was not only libidinous, but also calculating and scheming. In other words, this film "re-energized" and perpetuated the very worst impressions and stereotypes of Black sexuality and Black individuals as a whole. *Birth of a Nation* was prominently featured across the nation and was bitterly contested. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) worked diligently to ban this film to no avail. Perhaps the most critical point is that *Birth of a Nation* is credited with galvanizing the revival of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) in the twentieth century. As we know, one of the major reasons why the KKK originated was due, in large part, to the deep-seated White fear and anxiety of Black men being sexual with White women, and the concerted effort to keep miscegenation firmly in place. This longstanding racism had deleterious effects on African Americans' mental and physical health, not to mention the broader social implications of such bad treatment.

Another nationwide example of racist practices involving Black sexuality was the "Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male" (more generally known as the "Tuskegee Study" or "Tuskegee Syphilis Study"). This study—the way it was designed and carried out—was at the intersection of sexuality and public health. While details of this study are widely available, what is critical to understand is that 399 African American men with syphilis in Macon County, Alabama (and another 201 African American men without syphilis who served as controls in the study) were impacted. This study was sponsored by the United States Public Health Service (U.S.P.H.S.) and ran for four decades, from 1932 to 1972. Essentially, this study focused on observing

how untreated syphilis affected the physical health of these men. A host of problematic aspects occurred with this study, not the least of which involved the ethical dimensions.³⁵ The men who served as research subjects³⁶ were deceived. When the researchers from the U.S.P.H.S. approached these men in the early 1930s, the investigators indicated that they were offering treatments for “Bad Blood,” a medical term used in the past to indicate a vague diagnosis referring to a number of illnesses. In the communications from the Macon County Health Department to patients, they promised “special free treatment” and stressed that the follow-up visits would be their “last chance” for a “good examination.”³⁷ But this was not the case. These men were merely being monitored at best, and no such treatment was given for syphilis. Treatments for syphilis were available in the 1930s and, even more importantly, penicillin was widely available to treat this disease and other infections in the early

³⁵ For a broad overview of the “Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male” and the details about the ethical concerns of the study, see, for example, Allan Brandt, “Racism and Research: The Case of the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment,” in *Tuskegee’s Truths: Rethinking the Tuskegee Syphilis Study*, ed. Susan M. Reverby (University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 15-33; James H Jones, *Bad Blood* (Simon & Schuster, 1993); Thomas Parran, *Shadow on the Land* (Waverly, 1939); Susan M. Reverby, ed., *Tuskegee’s Truths: Rethinking the Tuskegee Syphilis Study* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000); and Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Doubleday, 2006).

³⁶ The use of the term “research subjects” is purposeful here. It is currently correct to use the term “research participants” and not “research subjects.” However, to suggest that the men used in the Tuskegee Syphilis Study were “research participants” suggests that they had informed consent, and that was not the case. They were used as “human guinea pigs” and were deceived throughout the entire duration of the study.

³⁷ For the original Tuskegee Syphilis Study Recruitment Letter from Macon County’s Health Department and an analysis, see Gwen Sharp, “Tuskegee Syphilis Study Recruitment Letter,” <https://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2014/08/22/tuskegee-syphilis-study-recruitment-letter/>, Accessed on October 13, 2019.

1940s. Nevertheless, these research subjects were made to forgo effective medical treatment as their bodies were ravaged by syphilis over the years. Many subjects died from complications of syphilitic infections. This study was permitted to continue until 1972 until Peter Buxton, a U.S.P.H.S. venereal disease investigator in San Francisco, exposed the U.S.P.H.S. experiment. Buxton learned of the details of the study and blew the whistle to a journalist friend, who released the details to an Associated Press journalist, Jean Heller, who then published a newspaper article in the *New York Times*,³⁸ and the study was discontinued at once. This study is considered by public health and history of medicine scholars to be one of the most egregious medical experiments in United States history. The alleged reason for the study was to ascertain how the progression of untreated syphilis differed in Black males compared to White males.³⁹

Although the Tuskegee Syphilis Study took place in the South, it had national implications and impacted Black sexuality and African American sexual health. First of all, the research subjects were Black men located in the American South. Clearly, Black men and their sexuality were seen as problematic, and in some ways they were viewed as unimportant and even disposable. Additionally, these men ended up causing secondary infections in their sex partners and in some cases in their unborn children. When this study fully came to light, it created significant mistrust in health care providers in general and specifically those providers who worked in the area of sexual health. This effect was a horrific blow to Black communities across the nation. Research on Black sexuality in general continues to reflect badly on African Americans.

³⁸ Jean Heller, "Syphilis Victims in U.S. Study Went Untreated for 40 Years." *New York Times* (25 July 1972): 8.

³⁹ In 1928 there was a Norwegian retrospective study on Caucasian men who suffered from untreated syphilis and how it impacted their bodies. As a retrospective study, the Norwegian study was not the same as the Tuskegee Syphilis Study methodologically. Researchers found in the Norwegian study that untreated syphilis caused neurological damage. It was thought by the Tuskegee researchers that Black men would most likely suffer more from cardiac issues given their assumed lack of intellectual sophistication due to their presumed inferiority.

A third example involved a fourteen-year-old African American youth named Emmett Till. Born and raised in Chicago, Illinois, young Emmett went to visit his relatives in the Delta Region of Mississippi in the summer of 1955. On one late August day he went into a local grocery store owned by a White couple named Carolyn and Roy Bryant. Allegedly, Emmett whistled at Carolyn and uttered some sexually suggestive words directed at her, and there was even the suggestion that he grabbed Carolyn in a lewd way. Carolyn was the only one working in the main part of the store that day; reportedly, there was another woman working in the back portion of the store who reported not hearing any of the supposed verbal exchanges between Emmett and Carolyn. However, some nights following the incident in the grocery store, Carolyn's husband, Roy, and his half-brother, J.W. Milam, went over to Till's great-uncle's home where Emmett was staying, and kidnapped him at gun point. Roy and J.M. beat Emmett viciously and mercilessly after which time they lynched him and then tied a heavy fan made of metal around Emmett's neck and dumped him in the Tallahatchie River. The men had no evidence that any of these actions were taken by Till toward Bryant, and in fact, following Roy and J.W.'s arrest, Carolyn's lawyer kept handwritten notes of their interview, which became the first written statement of the precipitating events: "she charged only that Till had 'insulted' her, not grabbed her, and certainly not attempted to rape her. The documents prove that there was a time when she did seem to know what had happened, and a time soon afterward when she became the mouthpiece of a monstrous lie."⁴⁰When Emmett's body was discovered in the river, his body was terribly disfigured. Emmett's mother, Mamie Bradley, insisted that her son's body be returned to Chicago for an open casket viewing to make the point about the racism and unspeakable hate crime from which her son suffered. Emmett Till's murder galvanized civil rights actions across the nation.

Even after more than sixty years, system racism continues regarding the Emmett Till case. In July 2019, a photograph appeared on Instagram of three young White men standing with a rifle and a shotgun in front of a commemorative sign marking the

⁴⁰ Timothy B. Tyson, *The Blood of Emmett Till* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017): 7.

location where Emmett Till's dead body was retrieved from the Tallahatchie River. Such an act of disrespect resulted in the suspension of the three students from their University of Mississippi fraternity, and federal authorities are investigating the incident.⁴¹ There have been many instances of vandalism to the commemorative signage over many years since it was first put up in 2007, 52 years after Till was murdered. It has been peppered with bullet holes a number of times and the signage was even stolen on one occasion.⁴² The Emmett Till case illustrates perhaps like no other example how racially charged the Jim Crow South was, and in many ways continues to be, and how even fabricated or exaggerated accounts of Black males' sexual impropriety—as defined by Southern White supremacist culture—could end in deadly consequences. It is the ultimate pathologization of Black sexuality. While this is the most extreme manifestation of negativity about Black sexuality, there clearly have been other ways negativity and pathologization have played out, including how biomedical and health research on Black sexuality has been framed and carried out. Clearly, White males' fear of Black men's sexuality to the point of violence did not end with the Emancipation Proclamation.

Sexology as a field of knowledge has by and large negatively treated Black sexuality, and McGruder reveals that many studies involving the sexuality of Black

⁴¹ Jerry Mitchell, "Ole Miss Students Posed with Guns in Front of Emmett Till's Memorial. DOJ May Investigate," <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/investigations/2019/07/25/ole-miss-students-posed-guns-front-emmett-till-memorial/1829450001/>, Accessed on October 7, 2019.

(Last Modified July 29, 2019), para 1 and *passim*. It should be noted that commemorative sign pictured in this article was previously riddled with bullet holes.

⁴² To glean a history of how the commemorative signage has been intentionally damaged and disrespected, see, for example, a brief CNN written account by Jessica Campisi and Brandon Griggs entitled "Emmett Till's Memorial Sign was Riddled with Bullet Holes. 35 Days after being Replaced, It was Shot Up Again" (August 6, 2018), which may be retrieved at <https://www.cnn.com/2018/08/06/us/emmett-till-sign-vandalized-trnd/index.html>, Accessed October 13, 2019

people have presented Black sexuality as non-normative⁴³ due to an overwhelming number of research studies that have pathologized Black sexuality by focusing on sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS. While researchers are calling attention to the rates of STIs in the Black population, sex researchers often do not provide context and underlying reasons why lack of trust in the medical community may well be a reason. McGruder points out how historical factors involving racism, poverty, and other inequities have been at work, serving as mechanisms to keep the incidence and prevalence of STIs (including HIV/AIDS) disproportionately higher than in other ethnic populations and in Whites. There is little doubt that the ways in which contemporary sexological research on Black sexual matters is framed both results from, and perpetuates, the deep historical roots of how Black sexuality has been portrayed as non-normative and even dangerous. From a social justice perspective, it is critically important that research studies on STIs in the Black population be routinely and thoroughly contextualized and historicized to unearth the root causes of these excessively high rates of STI transmission and sexual health disparities in the Black populace. Ultimately, it is crucial that such sexual health disparities be mitigated as well as to halt framing and perpetuating—even unwittingly—the notion that Black sexuality is non-normative.

A history of sexual marginalization created a certain amount of disassociation from sexuality for Black people. Additionally, African American churches have espoused a sex-negative view and have been known to be particularly harsh on LGBTQ members. Sexual prejudice (e.g., biphobia, homophobia) has been a strong component of the majority of African American churches and the messages they have imparted to their followers. It is clear that these churches promoted “Victorian ideals of respectability.”⁴⁴ The main point is that “These conservative sexual attitudes were particularly prevalent in faith communities such as African American churches.”⁴⁵

⁴³ Kevin McGruder, “Black Sexuality in the U.S.: Presentations as Non-Normative,” *Journal of African American Studies* 13 (2009), 253, *passim*.

⁴⁴ Rachel and Thrasher, “Black Sexuality in the United States,” para 18.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*

COUNTERING THE NEGATIVITY ABOUT BLACK SEXUALITY

While it is important to mark the systemic racism that has pointed to mainstream society's discomfort and fear of Black sexuality, it is equally as important to discuss actions that have fought against such injustices. It is absolutely true that Black people and their communities have been maltreated by hundreds of years of racism that have caused both symbolic and material harm. The injustices done by castigating Black individuals for their sexuality have been unconscionable. Such abuses in the forms of microaggressions and macroaggressions have had significant detrimental impacts. There is no question about how profoundly Black individuals and their communities have suffered from racism and how that translated, in part, into demonizing their sexuality. That history is real and needs to be respected and in no way covered up or misrepresented. At the same time, it is also important to point out how Black people and their allies responded and fought back in response to the prejudice and discrimination regarding Black sexual matters.

In a number of ways, resistance to fight against racism has been both realized and effective. One such example is the NAACP's response to *Birth of a Nation*. While it is true that many of the goals of the NAACP including censoring the film did not take hold, a number of other benefits for the NAACP and civil rights came as a result of organizing against the film. In the very early years of its existence, the NAACP focused predominantly on problematic issues that occurred almost exclusively in the South such as housing segregation and lynchings.⁴⁶ However, once *Birth of a Nation* was released, protests occurred all over the United States, as this film was a national phenomenon and relevant to more than one specific geographical area. Historian Stephen Weinberger put it best by asserting, "What is perhaps most interesting and important

⁴⁶ Stephen Weinberger, "The Birth of a Nation and the Making of the NAACP." *Journal of American Studies* 45, no. 1 (2011): 92.

about the campaign against *Birth* is that while it did not achieve its goals, it transformed the NAACP in ways no one could have anticipated."⁴⁷

The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s constituted many African American writers, artists, and social critics who questioned and challenged the pervasive stereotypes, racism, discrimination, and prejudice that haunted Black people from the slavery era well into the Jim Crow period in American history. Besides the overarching cultural work that the Harlem Renaissance achieved, it showed progress in the area of Black sexuality, as "we now know that many of the most significant participants within the Renaissance were... [gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer people] who found unprecedented amounts of social and intellectual freedom in 1920s New York, not to mention places like Chicago, Washington, D.C., and Atlanta."⁴⁸ Such writers as Langston Hughes and Richard Bruce Nugent included queer themes in their writings, and Blues singer Gladys Bentley often performed in drag. Additionally, drag balls held during this period included hundreds of individuals who were cross-dressed. These are merely a few of the numerous individuals who contributed to this rich historical period. The cultural work that resulted certainly challenged the hegemonic narrative that long haunted Black Americans generally and more specifically about their sexuality.

Long before the successes of striking down the miscegenation laws nationally with the Supreme Court ruling on the *Loving v. Virginia* case, fearless Black activists existed. A prime example of such courage in the face of savage and deadly racism were Black feminists. One such activist was Ida B. Wells (1862-1931), a journalist, "who not only exploded the myth of bestial, White-female-obsessed Black brute but who also established remarkably sophisticated ways of thinking of lynching as a means of controlling newly emancipated—and partially enfranchised—Black American populations."⁴⁹ A number of other Black activists spoke out against anti-Black sentiment connected to Black sexuality. Black icons W.E.B. Dubois (1868-1963), Mary Church

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Robert Reid-Pharr, "Sexuality," in *Encyclopedia of African American History: 1899 to the Present—From the Age of Segregation to the Twenty-First Century* (Volume 4), ed. Paul Finkelman (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 297.

⁴⁹ Robert Reid-Pharr, "Sexuality," 297.

Terrell (1863-1954), and Walter Francis White (1893-1955) were champions who specifically challenged the stereotype of the uncivilized Black male who sexually preyed on White women.⁵⁰

Another positive turn occurred when miscegenation laws nationwide were overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court. The last vestige of segregation laws was ruled unconstitutional in the famous court case of *Loving v. Virginia* in June of 1967.⁵¹ As a result of this Supreme Court ruling, all laws that banned marriages between individuals of mixed racial heritage were null and void. This finding freed individuals to marry whom they wished irrespective of the racial makeup of both people in the relationship. The case was a major victory considering the entrenched widespread belief and legal backing that White and Black individuals could not have interracial sex.

Another factor that helped to liberate Black sexuality is the corpus of scholarship on the topic, including E. Patrick Johnson's works, *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (2005), *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South: An Oral History* (2008), and *Black. Queer. Southern. Women.: An Oral History* (2018). These works represent a larger body of scholarship that serves to illuminate not only Black sexuality, but also non-heterosexual Black sexual and romantic liaisons. This body of work, not to mention other contributions by Black feminists such as Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberlé Crenshaw, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, and others, engages in critical and important conversations about Black sexuality. Black feminists, for example, provided a theoretical lens to examine oppression referred to as intersectionality. This tool continues to be a major contribution as it examines how individuals experience oppression differently based on their social location in terms of their sexuality, gender, class, race, ability, and religion, among other identities. By using this framework, sexuality scholars have been able to analyze oppression, such as sexual prejudice, in more nuanced and meaningful ways.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Peter Wallenstein, "The Right to Marry: *Loving v. Virginia*." *OAH Magazine of History* 9, no. 2 (1995): 41.

Issues of Black sexuality have surfaced in many other ways through popular culture. It has been a “mixed bag” in terms of perpetuating old, harmful stereotypes on the one hand or being liberatory on the other hand. Yet, some representations cannot be so neatly categorized in one camp or the other. Hollywood movies have portrayed Black sexuality in various ways, and music icons such as Aretha Franklin, Whitney Houston, Janet Jackson, Marvin Gaye, Prince, and others have lyrics in their songs that get at the heart of sex and relationships. How about rap and hip-hop artists and their messages about (Black) sexuality? How have they contributed to the discourse on Black sexuality? How about incidents that have spurred discussion such as when Magic Johnson was diagnosed with HIV,⁵² or the Congressional hearings that ensued when Clarence Thomas was being nominated to be an associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court and Anita Hill brought charges of sexual harassment? How about popular television programs that feature African Americans? How about the notion of the “Down Low” that was originally discussed as an African American male phenomenon in which presumably otherwise straight men would have sexual contact with other men in a clandestine fashion? While space constraints do not allow for fuller details, descriptions, and analyses of these various popular cultural representations of Black sexuality, they are certainly worthy of detailed analysis in terms of how they have influenced our views and discourses about Black sexuality in U.S. society.

⁵² Magic Johnson’s diagnosis of HIV and his nearly thirty years of living with the disease could seemingly have served as a positive role model for African Americans who were distrustful of the medical community. However, older generations are dubious of Johnson’s illness, suspecting that the announcement was a publicity stunt instead of an actual diagnosis; younger generations presume that Magic Johnson’s wealth has enabled his access to the best drugs and treatment. See, for example, Patricia B Wright, Katharine E. Stewart, Geoffrey M. Curran, and Brenda M. Booth. "A Qualitative Study of Barriers to the Utilization of HIV Testing Services Among Rural African American Cocaine Users." *Journal of drug issues* 43, no. 3 (2013): 314-334. This article may be retrieved at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3772639/>

CONCLUSION

Much more work must be done in terms of scholarly treatments of Black sexuality. There continues to be affronts to Black sexuality in American culture.⁵³ If this chapter explored the major (certainly not all) themes in the history of Black sexuality in the United States and identified points in history when culturally dominant views, stereotypes, and prejudice have been challenged in an attempt to achieve social and sexual justice for African Americans related to their sexuality, then I have achieved what I intended to accomplish. Rather than being a comprehensive compendium of Black sexuality, this chapter covers major events that have run throughout the history of Black sexuality in the United States in order to paint a broad picture of the challenges and achievements surrounding Black sexual issues.

⁵³ For a comprehensive coverage of the challenges that Black sexuality faces in contemporary American society, see, for example, Stacey Patton's essay "Who's Afraid of Black Sexuality?" (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 59, no.15, December 3, 2012).

Discussion Questions

1. How did stereotypes and treatment of Black people before slavery result in poor treatment regarding their sexuality?
2. Describe how slaves were sexually abused and how this practice demonstrated the masters' control over slaves' lives.
3. Identify and discuss various achievements in the twentieth century related to Black sexuality and how they countered old and harmful stereotypes about Black people's sexuality. Which of these achievements were more effective than others in promoting sexual and social justice? Provide reasons for your views.
4. Moving forward, how can we achieve even greater social and sexual justice for Black individuals and their communities? Use historical context to develop your ideas.

Writing Prompt

How has the historically documented bad treatment of African Americans' sexuality harmed them symbolically and materially? What historical events have helped to mitigate against the sexual prejudice from which African Americans and their communities have suffered? What historical events in the history of Black sexuality in the United States has impacted Black people, their communities, and their allies most? Provide reasons for your assertions and ideas.