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9 • *Patricia Hill Collins*

PRISONS FOR OUR BODIES, CLOSETS FOR OUR MINDS

Racism, Heterosexism, and Black Sexuality

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some of the specific problems that have resulted from seeing racism and heterosexism as two distinct systems of oppression?
2. According to Collins, what are some of the ways that racism and heterosexism have been institutionalized? Can you identify additional means?
3. How does heterosexism impact heterosexual African Americans?
4. How have the interconnected systems of racism and heterosexism produced gender-specific consequences?

White fear of black sexuality is a basic ingredient of white racism.

—Cornel West

For African Americans, exploring how sexuality has been manipulated in defense of racism is not new. Scholars have long examined the ways in which "white fear of black sexuality" has been a basic ingredient of racism. For example, colonial regimes routinely manipulated ideas about sexuality in order to maintain unjust power relations.[1] Tracing the history of contact between English explorers and colonists and West African societies, historian Winthrop Jordan contends that English perceptions of sexual practices among African people reflected preexisting English beliefs about Blackness, religion, and animals.[2] American historians point to the significance of sexuality to chattel slavery. In the United States, for example, slaveowners relied upon an ideology of Black sexual deviance to regulate and exploit enslaved Africans.[3] Because Black feminist analyses pay more attention to women's sexuality, they too identify how the sexual exploitation of women has been a basic ingredient of racism. For example, studies of African American slave women routinely point to sexual victimization as a defining feature of American slavery.[4] Despite the important contributions of this extensive literature on race and sexuality, because much of the literature assumes that sexuality means *hetero*sexuality, it ignores how racism and heterosexism influence one another.

In the United States, the assumption that racism and heterosexism constitute two separate systems of oppression masks how each relies upon the other for meaning. Because neither system of oppression makes sense without the other, racism and heterosexism might be better viewed as sharing one history with similar yet disparate effects on all Americans differentiated by race, gender, sexuality, class, and nationality. People who are positioned at the margins

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of both systems and who are harmed by both typically raise questions about the intersections of racism and heterosexism much earlier and/or more forcefully than those people who are in positions of privilege. In the case of intersections of racism and heterosexism, Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) people were among the first to question how racism and heterosexism are interconnected. As African American LGBT people point out, assuming that all Black people are heterosexual and that all LGBT people are White distorts the experiences of LGBT Black people. Moreover, such comparisons misread the significance of ideas about sexuality to racism and race to heterosexism.[5]

Until recently, questions of sexuality in general, and homosexuality in particular, have been treated as crosscutting, divisive issues within antiracist African American politics. The consensus issue of ensuring racial unity subordinated the allegedly crosscutting issue of analyzing sexuality, both straight and gay alike. This suppression has been challenged from two directions. Black women, both heterosexual and lesbian, have criticized the sexual politics of African American communities that leave women vulnerable to single motherhood and sexual assault. Black feminist and womanist projects have challenged Black community norms of a sexual double standard that punishes women for behaviors in which men are equally culpable. Black gays and lesbians have also criticized these same sexual politics that deny their right to be fully accepted within churches, families, and other Black community organizations. Both groups of critics argue that ignoring the heterosexism that underpins Black patriarchy hinders the development of a progressive Black sexual politics. As Cathy Cohen and Tamara Jones contend, "Black people need a liberatory politics that includes a deep understanding of how heterosexism operates as a system of oppression, both independently and in conjunction with other such systems. We need a black liberatory politics that affirms black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender sexualities. We need a black liberatory politics that understands the roles sexuality and gender play in reinforcing the oppression rooted in many black communities."[6] Developing a progressive Black sexual politics requires examining how racism and heterosexism mutually construct one another.

MAPPING RACISM AND HETEROSEXISM: THE PRISON AND THE CLOSET

> We regarded the struggle in prison as a microcosm of the struggle as a whole. We would fight inside as we had fought outside. The racism and repression were the same; I would simply have to fight on different terms.
>
> —Nelson Mandela

Like Nelson Mandela's view, when it comes to racism in the United States, life for African American women and men can be compared to being in prison.[7] Certainly the metaphor of the prison encapsulates the historical placement of African Americans in the U.S. political economy. The absence of political rights under chattel slavery and Jim Crow segregation and the use of police state powers against African Americans in urban ghettos have meant that Black people could be subjugated, often with little recourse. Moreover, prisons are rarely run solely by force. Routine practices such as strip searches, verbal abuse, restricting basic privileges, and ignoring physical and sexual assault among inmates aim to control prisoners by dehumanizing them. Visiting his brother Robbie, who was incarcerated on a life sentence in a Pennsylvania prison, author John Wideman describes this disciplinary process:

> The visitor is forced to become an inmate. Subjected to the same sorts of humiliation and depersonalization. Made to feel powerless, intimidated by the might of the state. Visitors are treated like both children and ancient, incorrigible sinners. We experience a crash course that teaches us in a dramatic, unforgettable fashion just how low a prisoner is in the institution's estimation. We also learn how rapidly we can descend to the same depth.... We suffer the keepers prying eyes, prying machines, prying hands. We let them lock us in without any guarantee the doors will open when we wish to leave. We are in fact their prisoners until they release us. That was the idea. To transform the visitor into something he despised and feared. A prisoner.[8]

As direct recipients of the anti–civil rights agenda advanced under conservative Republican administrations, contemporary African Americans living in inner cities experienced the brunt of punitive governmental policies that had a similar intent.[9] Dealing with impersonal bureaucracies often subjected them to the same sorts of "humiliation and depersonalization" that Wideman felt while visiting his brother. Just as he was "made to feel powerless, intimidated by the might of the state," residents of African American inner-city neighborhoods who deal with insensitive police officers, unresponsive social workers, and disinterested teachers report similar feelings.

African American reactions to racial resegregation in the post–civil rights era, especially those living in hyper-segregated, poor, inner-city neighborhoods, resemble those of people who are in prison. Prisoners that turn on one another are much easier to manage than ones whose hostility is aimed at their jailers. Far too often, African Americans coping with racial segregation and ghettoization simply turn on one another, reflecting heightened levels of alienation and nihilism.[10] Faced with no jobs, crumbling public school systems, the influx of drugs into their neighborhoods, and the easy availability of guns, many blame one another. Black youth are especially vulnerable.[11] As urban prisoners, the predilection for some Black men to kill others over seemingly unimportant items such as gym shoes, jewelry, and sunglasses often seems incomprehensible to White Americans and to many middle-class Black Americans. Privileged groups routinely assume that all deserving Americans live in decent housing, attend safe schools with caring teachers, and will be rewarded for their hard work with college opportunities and good jobs. They believe that undeserving Blacks and Latinos who remain locked up in deteriorating inner cities get what they deserve and do not merit social programs that will show them a future. This closing door of opportunity associated with hyper-segregation creates a situation of shrinking opportunities and neglect. This is the exact climate that breeds a culture of violence that is a growing component of "street culture" in working-class and poor Black neighborhoods.[12]

Given this context, why should anyone be surprised that rap lyrics often tell the stories of young Black men who feel that they have nothing to lose, save their respect under a "code of the street."[13] Ice Cube's 1993 rap "It Was a Good Day," describes a "good" day for a young Black man living in Los Angeles. On a "good" day, he didn't fire his gun, he got food that he wanted to eat, the cops ignored him and didn't pull him over for an imaginary infraction, and he didn't have to kill anyone. Is this art imitating life, or vice versa? Sociologist Elijah Anderson's ethnographic studies of working-class and poor Black youth living in Philadelphia suggests that for far too many young African American males, Ice Cube's bad days are only too real.[14] Just as male prisoners who are perceived as being weak encounter relentless physical and sexual violence, weaker members of African American communities are preyed upon by the strong. Rap artist Ice T explains how masculinity and perceived weakness operate:

> You don't understand anyone who is weak. You look at gay people as prey. There isn't anybody in the ghetto teaching that some people's sexual preferences are predisposed. You're just ignorant. You got to get educated, you got to get out of that jail cell called the ghetto to really begin to understand. All you see is a sissy. A soft dude. A punk.[15]

Women, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people, children, people living with HIV, drug addicts, prostitutes, and others deemed to be an embarrassment to the broader African American community or a drain upon its progress or simply in the wrong place at the wrong time become targets of silencing, persecution, and or abuse. This is what prisons do—they breed intolerance.

The experiences of people in prison also shed light on the myriad forms of African American resistance to the strictures of racial oppression. No matter how restrictive the prison, some prisoners find ways to resist. Often within plain sight of their guards, people who are imprisoned devise ingenious ways to reject prison policies. Nelson Mandela recounts the numerous ways that he and his fellow prisoners outwitted, undermined, tricked, and, upon occasion, confronted their captors during the twenty-seven years that he spent as a political prisoner in South African prisons. Craving news of the political struggle outside, prisoners communicated by writing in milk on blank paper, letting it dry to invisibility and, once the note was passed on, making the words reappear with the disinfectant used to clean their cells. They smuggled messages to one another in plastic wrapped packages hidden in food drums.[16] In the case of solitary confinement where an inmate could

be locked up for twenty-three hours a day in a dark cell, just surviving constituted an act of resistance. As Mandela observes, "Prison is designed to break one's spirit and destroy one's resolve. To do this, the authorities attempt to exploit every weakness, demolish every initiative, negate all signs of individuality—all with the idea of stamping out that spark that makes each of us human and each of us who we are."[17] Mandela and his fellow prisoners recognized the function of actual prisons under racial apartheid and of apartheid policies as an extension of prison.

Recognizing that their everyday lives resemble those of prison inmates often politicizes individuals. Autobiographies by African Americans who were imprisoned because of their political beliefs, for example, Angela Davis and Assata Shakur, or who became politicized during their imprisonment, for example, Malcolm X or George Jackson, point to the significance of actual incarceration as a catalyst for resistance. In the 1980s, many poor and working-class African American youth who were locked up in urban ghettos and facing the closing door of opportunity refused to turn their rage upon one another. Instead, many chose to rap about the violence and intolerance around them and, in the process, created an influential hiphop culture that reached youth all over the world. Crafted in the South Bronx, an urban landscape that had been abandoned by virtually everyone, African American, Latino, and Afro-Caribbean youth created rap, break dancing, tagging (graffiti), fashions and other cultural creations.[18] Ice Cube's rap about his good day represents the tip of an immense hip-hop iceberg. With few other public forums to share their outrage at a society that had so thoroughly written them off, Black youth used rap and hip-hop to protest the closing door of opportunity in their lives and to claim their humanity in the face of the dehumanization of racial segregation and ghettoization. Without strategies of noncooperation such as those exhibited by Mandela and his colleagues and without developing new forms of resistance such as hip-hop, Black people simply would not have survived.

What is freedom in the context of prison? Typically, incarcerated people cannot voluntarily "come out" of prison but must find a way to "break out." Under chattel slavery, the history of the Underground Railroad certainly reflected the aspirations of enslaved Africans to break out of the prison of slavery and to flee to the quasi freedom offered by Northern states. But just as gender, age, skin color, and class affect the contours of oppression itself, these very same categories shape strategies of resistance. As African American women's slave narratives point out, men and young people could more easily break out by running away than women, mothers, and older people. Then as now, African American women are often reluctant to leave their families, and many sacrifice their own personal freedom in order to stay behind and care for children and for others who depend on them. Under Jim Crow segregation, very light-skinned African Americans faced the difficult choice of "passing" and leaving their loved ones behind. More recently, as prime beneficiaries of the antidiscrimination and affirmative action policies of the civil rights movement, many middle-class and affluent African Americans have moved to distant White suburbs. Such actions certainly reflect a desire to escape the problems associated with poor and working-class Black neighborhoods. If one can "buy" one's freedom, as Nike ads proclaim, why not exercise personal choice and "just do it"?

In other situations, African Americans have recognized the confines of the prison and, through unruly, spontaneous uprisings or through organized political protests, have turned upon their jailers. A series of urban uprisings in cities such as New York, Detroit, Miami (1980), Los Angeles (1992), and Cincinnati (2001) typify the explosive reactions of many poor and working-class African Americans to bad schools, terrible housing, no jobs, little money, and dwindling prospects. The catalyst is usually the same—police brutality against unlucky African American citizens. More organized Black protests also reflect this process of turning upon the jailers of racism and refusing to cooperate with unjust laws and customs. Historically, social formations that kept African Americans impoverished and virtually powerless—chattel slavery, labor exploitation of the Jim Crow Southern agriculture, and the continuing growth of urban ghettos—all sparked organized African American political protest. The abolitionist movement, the formation of the NAACP (1909) and the Urban League (1910), the size of Marcus Garvey's Black Nationalist United Negro Improvement Association (1920s), the many organizations that participated in the civil rights and Black Power movements, and the increased visibility of Black youth through hip-hop culture reflect resistance to racism.

Racism may be likened to a prison, yet sexual oppression has more often been portrayed using the metaphor of the "closet."[19] This metaphor is routinely invoked to describe the oppression of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people. Historically, because religion and science alike defined homosexuality as deviant, LGBT people were forced to conceal their sexuality.[20] For homosexuals, the closet provided some protection from homophobia that stigmatized LGBT sexual expression as deviant. Being in the closet meant that most hid their sexual orientation in the most important areas of their lives. With family, friends, or at work, many LGBT people passed as "straight" in order to avoid suspicion and exposure. Passing as straight fostered the perception that few gays and lesbians existed. The invisibility of gays and lesbians helped normalize heterosexuality, fueled homophobia, and supported heterosexism as a system of power.[21]

Because closets are highly individualized, situated within families, and distributed across the segregated spaces of racial, ethnic, and class neighborhoods, and because sexual identity is typically negotiated later than social identities of gender, race, and class, LGBT people often believe that they are alone. Being in the private, hidden, and domestic space of the closet leaves many LGBT adolescents to suffer in silence. During the era of racial segregation, heterosexism operated as smoothly as it did because hidden or closeted sexualities remained relegated to the margins of society *within* racial/ethnic groups. Staying in the closet stripped LBGT people of rights. The absence of political rights has meant that sexual minorities could be fired from their jobs, moved from their housing, have their children taken away in custody battles, dismissed from the military, and be targets of random street violence, often with little recourse. Rendering LGBT sexualities virtually invisible enabled the system of heterosexism to draw strength from the seeming naturalness of heterosexuality.[22]

Since the 1980s, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people have challenged heterosexism by coming out of the closet. If the invisibility of sexual oppression enabled it to operate unopposed, then making heterosexism visible by being "out" attacked heterosexism at its core. Transgressing sexual borders became the hallmark of LGBT politics. The individual decision to come out to one's family or friends enabled formerly closeted LGBT people to live openly and to unsettle the normalization of heterosexuality. Transgression also came to characterize one strand of gay group politics, moving from the gay and lesbian identity politics of the first phase of "gay liberation" to more recent queer politics.[23] Gay pride marches that embrace drag queens, cross-dressers, gay men who are flamboyantly dressed, individuals with indeterminate gender identities, and mannish lesbians push the envelope beyond accepting the LGBT people who are indistinguishable from everyone else, save for this one area of sexual orientation. Through public, visible, and often outrageous acts, "queering" normal sexuality became another hallmark of LGBT politics. The phrase, "we're queer, we're here, get used to it" embraces a clear stance of defiance. At the same time, another strand of gay politics strives to be seen as "good gay citizens" who should be entitled to the same rights as everyone else. Practices such as legitimating gay marriages and supporting adoptions by gay and lesbian couples constitute another expression of transgression. By aiming for the legitimacy granted heterosexual couples and families, gay and lesbian couples simultaneously uphold family yet profoundly challenge its meaning.[24]

Racism and heterosexism, the prison and the closet, appear to be separate systems, but LGBT African Americans point out that *both* systems affect their everyday lives. If racism and heterosexism affect Black LGBT people, then these systems affect *all* people, including heterosexual African Americans. Racism and heterosexism certainly converge on certain key points. For one, both use similar state-sanctioned institutional mechanisms to maintain racial and sexual hierarchies. For example, in the United States, racism and heterosexism both rely on segregating people as a mechanism of social control. For racism, segregation operates by using race as a visible marker of group membership that enables the state to relegate Black people to inferior schools, housing, and jobs. Racial segregation relies on enforced membership in a visible community in which racial discrimination is tolerated. For heterosexism, segregation is enforced by pressuring LGBT individuals to remain closeted and thus segregated from one another. Before social movements for gay and lesbian liberation, sexual segregation meant that refusing to claim homosexual identities virtually eliminated any group-based political action to resist heterosexism.

For another, the state has played a very important role in sanctioning both forms of oppression. In support of racism, the state sanctioned laws that regulated where Black people could live, work, and attend school. In support of heterosexism, the state maintained laws that refused to punish hate crimes against LGBT people, that failed to offer protection when LGBT people were stripped of jobs and children, and that generally sent a message that LGBT people who came out of the closet did so at their own risk.[25]

Racism and heterosexism also share a common set of practices that are designed to discipline the population into accepting the status quo. These disciplinary practices can best be seen in the enormous amount of attention paid both by the state and organized religion to the institution of marriage. If marriage were in fact a natural and normal occurrence between heterosexual couples and if it occurred naturally within racial categories, there would be no need to regulate it. People would naturally choose partners of the opposite sex and the same race. Instead, a series of laws have been passed, all designed to regulate marriage. For example, for many years, the tax system has rewarded married couples with tax breaks that have been denied to single taxpayers or unmarried couples. The message is clear—it makes good financial sense to get married. Similarly, to encourage people to marry within their assigned race, numerous states passed laws banning interracial marriage. These restrictions lasted until the landmark Supreme Court decision in 1967 that overturned state laws. The state has also passed laws designed to keep LGBT people from marrying. In 1996, the U.S. Congress passed the Federal Defense of Marriage Act that defined marriage as a "legal union between one man and one woman." In all of these cases, the state perceives that it has a compelling interest in disciplining the population to marry and to marry the correct partners.[26]

Racism and heterosexism also manufacture ideologies that defend the status quo. When ideologies that defend racism and heterosexism become taken-for-granted and appear to be natural and inevitable, they become hegemonic. Few question them and the social hierarchies they defend. Racism and heterosexism both share a common cognitive framework that uses binary thinking to produce hegemonic ideologies. Such thinking relies on oppositional categories. It views race through two oppositional categories of Whites and Blacks, gender through two categories of men and women, and sexuality through two oppositional categories of heterosexuals and homosexuals. A master binary of normal and deviant overlays and bundles together these and other lesser binaries. In this context, ideas about "normal" race (whiteness, which ironically, masquerades as racelessness), "normal" gender (using male experiences as the norm), and "normal" sexuality (heterosexuality, which operates in a similar hegemonic fashion) are tightly bundled together. In essence, to be completely "normal," one must be White, masculine, and heterosexual, the core hegemonic White masculinity. This mythical norm is hard to see because it is so taken-for-granted. Its antithesis, its Other, would be Black, female, and lesbian, a fact that Black lesbian feminist Audre Lorde pointed out some time ago.[27]

Within this oppositional logic, the core binary of normal/deviant becomes ground zero for justifying racism and heterosexism. The deviancy assigned to race and that assigned to sexuality becomes an important point of contact between the two systems. Racism and heterosexism both require a concept of sexual deviancy for meaning, yet the form that deviance takes within each system differs. For racism, the point of deviance is created by a *normalized White heterosexuality* that depends on a *deviant Black heterosexuality* to give it meaning. For heterosexism, the point of deviance is created by this very same *normalized White heterosexuality* that now depends on a *deviant White homosexuality*. Just as racial normality requires the stigmatization of the sexual practices of Black people, heterosexual normality relies upon the stigmatization of the sexual practices of homosexuals. In both cases, installing White heterosexuality as normal, natural, and ideal requires stigmatizing alternate sexualities as abnormal, unnatural, and sinful.

The purpose of stigmatizing the sexual practices of Black people and those of LGBT people may be similar, but the content of the sexual deviance assigned to each differs. Black people carry the stigma of *promiscuity* or excessive or unrestrained heterosexual desire. This is the sexual deviancy that has both been assigned to Black people and been used to construct racism. In contrast, LGBT people carry the stigma of *rejecting* heterosexuality by engaging in unrestrained homosexual desire. Whereas the deviancy associated with promiscuity (and, by implication, with Black people as a race) is thought to lie in an *excess* of heterosexual desire, the pathology of homosexuality (the invisible, closeted sexuality that becomes impossible within heterosexual space) seemingly resides in the *absence* of it.

While analytically distinct, in practice, these two sites of constructed deviancy work together and both help create the "sexually repressive culture" in America described by Cheryl Clarke.[28] Despite their significance for American society overall, here I confine my argument to the challenges that confront Black people.[29] Both sets of ideas frame a hegemonic discourse of *Black sexuality* that has at its core ideas about an assumed promiscuity among heterosexual African American men and women and the impossibility of homosexuality among Black gays and lesbians.

AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE RACIALIZATION OF PROMISCUITY

Ideas about Black promiscuity that produce contemporary sexualized spectacles such as Jennifer Lopez, Destiny's Child, Ja Rule, and the many young Black men on the U.S. talk show circuit have a long history. Historically, Western science, medicine, law, and popular culture reduced an African-derived aesthetic concerning the use of the body, sensuality, expressiveness, and spirituality to an ideology about *Black sexuality*. The distinguishing feature of this ideology was its reliance on the idea of Black promiscuity. The possibility of distinctive and worthwhile African-influenced worldviews on anything, including sexuality, as well as the heterogeneity of African societies expressing such views, was collapsed into an imagined, pathologized Western discourse of what was thought to be essentially African.[30] To varying degrees, observers from England, France, Germany, Belgium, and other colonial powers perceived African sensuality, eroticism, spirituality, and/or sexuality as deviant, out of control, sinful, and as an essential feature of racial difference.[31]

Western religion, science, and media took over 350 years to manufacture an ideology of Black sexuality that assigned (heterosexual) promiscuity to Black people and then used it to justify racial discrimination. The racism of slavery and colonialism needed ideological justification. Toward this end, preexisting British perceptions of Blackness became reworked to frame notions of racial difference that, over time, became folded into a broader primitivist discourse on race. Long before the English explored Africa, the terms "black" and "white" had emotional meaning within England. Before colonization, white and black connoted opposites of purity and filthiness, virginity and sin, virtue and baseness, beauty and ugliness, and God and the devil.[32] Bringing this preexisting framework with them, English explorers were especially taken by Africans' color. Despite actual variations of skin color among African people, the English described them as being *black*, "an exaggerated term which in itself suggests that the Negro's complexion had powerful impact upon their perceptions."[33] From first contact, biology mattered—racial difference was embodied. European explorers and the traders, colonists, and settlers who followed were also struck by the differences between their own cultures and those of continental Africans. Erroneously interpreting African cultures as being inferior to their own, European colonial powers redefined Africa as a "primitive" space, filled with Black people and devoid of the accoutrements of more civilized cultures. In this way, the broad ethnic diversity among the people of continental Africa became reduced to more generic terms such as "primitive," "savage," and "native." Within these categories, one could be an Ashanti or a Yoruba, but each was a savage, primitive native all the same. The resulting primitivist discourse redefined African societies as inferior.[34]

Western natural and social sciences were deeply involved in constructing this primitivist discourse that reached full fruition in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[35] Through laboratory experiments and field research, Western science attempted to understand these perceived racial differences while creating, through its own practices, those very same differences. For example, Sarah Bartmann's dissection illustrates this fascination with biological difference as the site of racial difference, with sexual difference of women further identified as an important topic of study.[36] Moreover, this perception of Africa worked with an important idea within nineteenth-century science, namely, the need to classify and rank objects, places, living things, and people. Everything had its place and all places were ranked.[37] With its primitiveness and alleged jungles, Africa and its peoples marked

the bottom, the worst place to be, and a place ripe for colonial conquest. Yet at the same time, Africa was dangerous, different, and alluring. This new category of primitive situated Africans just below Whites and right above apes and monkeys, who marked this boundary distinguishing human from animals. Thus, within Western science, African people and apes occupied a fluid border zone between humans and animals.

With all living creatures classified in this way, Western scientists perceived African people as being more natural and less civilized, primarily because African people were deemed to be closer to animals and nature, especially the apes and monkeys whose appearance most closely resembled humans. Like African people, animals also served as objects of study for Western science because understanding the animal kingdom might reveal important insights about civilization, culture, and what distinguished the human "race" from its animal counterparts as well as the human "races" from one another. Donna Haraway's study of primatology illustrates Western scientists' fascination with identifying how apes differed from humans: "the study of apes was more about humans. Moreover, the close proximity to apes and monkeys that Africans occupied within European derived taxonomies of life such as the Great Chain of Being worked to link Africans and animals through a series of overlapping constructs. Apes and Africans both lived in Africa, a place of wild animals and wild people. In both cases, their source of wildness emerged from their lack of culture and their acting out of instinct or bodily impulses."[38] This family resemblance between African people and animals was not benign—viewing Africans and animals alike as embodied creatures ruled by "instinct or bodily impulses" worked to humanize apes and dehumanize Black people.

In this context, studying the sexual practices of African people and animals took on special meaning. Linking African people and animals was crucial to Western views of Black promiscuity. Genital sexual intercourse or, more colloquially, the act of "fucking," characterized animal sexuality. Animals are promiscuous because they lack intellect, culture, and civilization. Animals do not have erotic lives; they merely "fuck" and reproduce. Certainly animals could be slaughtered, sold, and domesticated as pets because within capitalist political economies, animals were commodities that were owned as private property. As the history of animal breeding suggests, the sexual promiscuity of horses, cattle, chickens, pigs, dogs, and other domesticated animals could be profitable for their owners. By being classified as proximate to wild animals and, by analogy, eventually being conceptualized as being animals (chattel), the alleged deviancy of people of African descent lay in their sexual promiscuity, a "wildness" that also was believed to characterize animal sexuality. Those most proximate to animals, those most lacking civilization, also were those humans who came closest to having the sexual lives of animals. Lacking the benefits of Western civilization, people of African descent were perceived as having a biological nature that was inherently more sexual than that of Europeans. The primitivist discourse thus created the category of "beast" and the sexuality of such beasts as "wild." The legal classification of enslaved African people as chattel (animal-like) under American slavery that produced controlling images of bucks, jezebels, and breeder women drew meaning from this broader interpretive framework.[39]

Historically, this ideology of Black sexuality that pivoted on a Black heterosexual promiscuity not only upheld racism but it did so in gender-specific ways. In the context of U.S. society, beliefs in Black male promiscuity took diverse forms during distinctive historical periods. For example, defenders of chattel slavery believed that slavery safely domesticated allegedly dangerous Black men because it regulated their promiscuity by placing it in the service of slave owners. Strategies of control were harsh and enslaved African men who were born in Africa or who had access to their African past were deemed to be the most dangerous. In contrast, the controlling image of the rapist appeared after emancipation because Southern Whites' feared that the unfettered promiscuity of Black freedmen constituted a threat to the Southern way of life. In this situation, beliefs about White womanhood helped shape the mythology of the Black rapist. Making White women responsible for keeping the purity of the White race, White men "cast themselves as protectors of civilization, reaffirming not only their role as social and familial 'heads,' but their paternal property rights as well."[40]

African American women encountered a parallel set of beliefs concerning Black female promiscuity. White Americans may have been repulsed by a Black sexuality that they redefined as uncivilized "fucking," but the actions of White men demonstrated that they simultaneously were fascinated with the Black women who they thought engaged in it. Under American slavery, all White men within a slave-owning family could treat enslaved African women within their own families as sexual property. The myth that it was impossible to rape Black women because they were already promiscuous helped mask the sexual exploitation of enslaved Black women by their owners. Using enslaved Black women for medical experimentation constituted another form of control. As individuals who are trained to watch, dissect, and cast a critical eye on biological and social phenomena, scientists became voyeurs *extraordinaire* of Black women's bodies. For example, between 1845 and 1849, Marion Sims, now remembered variously as the Father of American Gynecology, the Father of Modern Gynecology, and the Architect of the Vagina, conducted surgical experiments on slave women in his backyard hospital in Montgomery, Alabama. Aiming to cure vaginal fistulas resulting from hard or extended childbirth, Sims discovered a way to peer into Black women's vaginas. Placing Lucy, a slave woman into knee-chest position for examination, Sims inserted a pewter spoon into her vagina and recounts, "introducing the bent handle of the spoon I saw everything, as no man had ever seen before. The fistula was as plain as the nose on a man's face."[41]

The events themselves may be over, but their effects persist under the new racism. This belief in an inherent Black promiscuity reappears today. For example, depicting poor and working-class African American inner-city neighborhoods as dangerous urban jungles where SUV-driving White suburbanites come to score drugs or locate prostitutes also invokes a history of racial and sexual conquest. Here sexuality is linked with danger, and understandings of both draw upon historical imagery of Africa as a continent replete with danger and peril to the White explorers and hunters who penetrated it. Just as contemporary safari tours in Africa create an imagined Africa as the "White man's playground" and mask its economic exploitation, jungle language masks social relations of hyper-segregation that leave working-class Black communities isolated, impoverished, and dependent on a punitive welfare state and an illegal international drug trade. Under this logic, just as wild animals (and the proximate African natives) belong in nature preserves (for their own protection), unassimilated, undomesticated poor and working-class African Americans belong in racially segregated neighborhoods.

This belief in Black promiscuity also continues to take gender-specific forms. African American men live with the ideological legacy that constructs Black male heterosexuality through images of wild beasts, criminals, and rapists. A chilling case was provided in 1989 by the media coverage of an especially brutal crime that came to be known as the "Central Park Jogger" panic. In this case, a White woman investment banker jogging in Central Park was raped, severely beaten, and left for dead. At the time, the police believed that she had been gang-raped by as many as twelve Black and Latino adolescents. The horror of the crime itself is not in question, for this attack was truly appalling. But as African American cultural critic Houston A. Baker points out, what was also noteworthy about the case was the way in which it crystallized issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality in the mass media. The assault occurred during a time when young Black men and hip-hop culture were becoming increasingly visible in urban public space. Lacking spacious basement recreation rooms and well-tended soccer fields, African American and Latino youth set up their equipment on streets and in public parks, creating public hip-hop theaters. Graffiti, breakdancing, and enormous boom boxes blasting the angry lyrics of gangsta rap effectively "blackened" urban spaces. Baker describes how public space became a site of controversy: "Urban public space of the late twentieth-century [became] . . . spaces of audiovisual contest. It's something like this: 'My billboards and neon and handbills and high-decibel-level television advertising are purely for the public good. Your boom boxes and graffiti are evil pollutants. Erase them, shut them down!'"[42]

The attack in Central Park occurred in this political, social, and cultural context. The "park panic" that followed the incident drew upon this fear of young Black men in public space, as evidenced by their loudness, their rap music, and their disrespect for order (graffiti). In doing so, it referenced the primitivist ideology of Blacks as animalistic. Media phrases such as "roving bands" and "wolf pack" that were used to describe young urban Black and Latino males during this period were only comprehensible *because*

of long-standing assumptions of Black promiscuity. Drawing upon the historical discourse on Black promiscuity, the phrase "to go buck wild" morphed into the new verb of "wilding" that appeared virtually overnight. Baker is especially insightful in his analysis of how the term "wilding" sounded very much like rapper Tone-Loc's hit song "Wild Thing," a song whose content described sexual intercourse. "Wilding" and "Wild Thing" belong to the same nexus of meaning, one that quickly circulated through mass media and became a plausible (at least as far as the media was concerned), explanation for the brutality of the crime.[43] Resurrecting images of Black men as predatory and wild, rape and "wilding" became inextricably linked with Black masculinity.

The outcome of this case shows how deeply entrenched ideologies can produce scenarios that obscure the facts. Ironically, twelve years after five young Black males were convicted of the crime, doubts arose concerning their guilt. A convicted murderer and serial rapist came forward, confessed to the rape, and claimed he had acted alone. After his story was corroborated by DNA testing, the evidence against the original "wolf pack" seemed far less convincing than in the climate created by "wilding" as the natural state of young Black men. In 2003, all of the teenagers originally convicted of the crime were exonerated, unfortunately, after some had served lengthy jail terms.[44]

African American women also live with ideas about Black women's promiscuity and lack of sexual restraint. Reminiscent of concerns with Black women's fertility under slavery and in the rural South, contemporary social welfare policies also remain preoccupied with Black women's fertility. In prior eras, Black women were encouraged to have many children. Under slavery, having many children enhanced slave owners' wealth and a good "breeder woman" was less likely to be sold.[45] In rural agriculture after emancipation, having many children ensured a sufficient supply of workers. But in the global economy of today, large families are expensive because children must be educated. Now Black women are seen as producing too many children who contribute less to society than they take. Because Black women on welfare have long been seen as undeserving, long-standing ideas about Black women's promiscuity become recycled and redefined as a problem for the state.[46]

In her important book *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty,* legal scholar Dorothy Roberts claims that the "systematic, denial of reproductive freedom has uniquely marked Black women's history in America."[47] Believing the unquestioned assumption of Black female promiscuity influences how poor and working-class Black women are treated. The inordinate attention paid to the sexual lives of adolescent Black women reflects this ongoing concern with an assumed Black female promiscuity.[48] Rather than looking at lack of sex education, poverty, sexual assault, and other factors that catalyze high rates of pregnancy among young Black women, researchers and policy makers often blame the women themselves and assume that the women are incapable of making their own decisions. Pregnancy, especially among poor and working-class young Black women, has been seen as evidence that Black women lack the capacity to control their sexual lives. As a visible sign of a lack of discipline and/or immorality, becoming pregnant and needing help exposes poor and working-class women to punitive state policies.[49] Arguing that Black women have been repeatedly denied reproductive autonomy and control over their own bodies, Roberts surveys a long list of current violations against African American women. Black women are denied reproductive choice and offered Norplant, Depo-Provera, and similar forms of birth control that encourage them to choose sterilization. Pregnant Black women with drug addictions receive criminal sentences instead of drug treatment and prenatal care. Criticizing two controversial ways in which the criminal justice system penalizes pregnancy, Roberts identifies the impossible choice that faces women in these situations. When a pregnant woman is prosecuted for exposing her baby to drugs in the womb, her crime hinges on her decision to have a baby. If she has an abortion she can avoid prosecution, but if she chooses to give birth, she risks going to prison. Similarly, when a judge imposes birth control as a condition of probation, for example, by giving a defendant the choice between Norplant or jail, incarceration becomes the penalty for her choice to remain fertile. These practices theoretically affect all women, but, in actuality, they apply primarily to poor and working-class Black women. As Roberts points out, "prosecutors and judges see poor Black women as suitable subjects for these reproductive penalties because

society does not view these women as suitable mothers in the first place."[50]

AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE WHITENING OF HOMOSEXUALITY

Depicting people of African descent as symbols of embodied, natural sexuality that "fucked" like animals and produced babies installed Black people as the essence of nature. Moreover, the concern with Black fertility linked perceptions of promiscuity to assumptions of heterosexuality. Within this logic, homosexuality was assumed to be impossible among Black people because same-sex sexual practices did not result in reproduction:

> Among the myths Europeans have created about Africa, the myth that homosexuality is absent or incidental is the oldest and most enduring. For Europeans, black Africans—of all the native peoples of the world—most epitomized "primitive man." Since primitive man is supposed to be close to nature, ruled by instinct, and culturally unsophisticated, he had to be heterosexual, his sexual energies and outlets demoted exclusively to their "natural" purpose: biological reproduction. If black Africans were the most primitive people in all humanity—if they were, indeed, human, which some debated—then they had to be the most heterosexual.[51]

If racism relied on assumptions of Black promiscuity that in turn enabled Black people to "breed like animals," then Black sexual practices that did not adhere to these assumptions challenged racism at its very core. Either Black people could not be homosexual or those Blacks who were homosexual were not "authentically" Black.[52] Black people were allegedly not threatened by homosexuality because they were protected by their "natural" heterosexuality. In contrast, Whites had no such "natural" protection and thus had to work harder at proving their heterosexuality. By a curious twist of logic, these racist assumptions about an authentic Blackness grounded in a promiscuous heterosexuality helped define Whiteness as well. In this context, homosexuality could be defined as an internal threat to the integrity of the (White) nuclear family. Beliefs in a naturalized, normal hyper-heterosexuality among Black people effectively "whitened" homosexuality. Within a logic that constructed race itself from racially pure families, homosexuality constituted a major threat to the White race.[53]

Contemporary African American politics confront some real contradictions here. A discourse that constructs Black people as the natural essence of hyper-heterosexuality and White people as the source of homosexuality hinders developing a comprehensive analysis of Black sexuality that speaks to the needs of straight and gay Black people alike. Those African Americans who internalize racist ideologies that link Black hyper-heterosexuality with racial authenticity can propose problematic solutions to adolescent pregnancy, rape, sexual violence, and the troubling growth of HIV/AIDS among African Americans. Such beliefs generate strategies designed to regulate tightly the sexual practices of Black people as the fundamental task of Black sexual politics. This position inadvertently accepts racist views of Blackness and advocates an antiracist politics that advocates copying the heterosexist norms associated with White normality. Such beliefs also foster perceptions of LGBT Black people as being less authentically Black. If authentic Black people (according to the legacy of scientific racism) are heterosexual, then LGBT Black people are less authentically Black because they engage in allegedly "White" sexual practices. This entire system of sexual regulation is turned on its head when heterosexual African Americans reject promiscuity yet advocate for a Black eroticism.

In a similar fashion, visible, vocal LGBT Black people who come out and claim an eroticism that is not predicated upon heterosexuality also profoundly challenge the same system. The historical invisibility of LGBT African Americans reflects this double containment, both within the prison of racism that segregates Black people in part due to their alleged sexual deviancy of promiscuity and within the closet of heterosexism due to the alleged sexual deviancy of homosexuality. The closets created by heterosexism were just as prominent within Black communities as outside them. For example, the Black Church, one of the mainstays of African American resistance to racial oppression, fostered a deeply religious ethos within African American life and culture.[54] The Black Church remains the linchpin of

African American communal life, and its effects can be seen in Black music, fraternal organizations, neighborhood associations, and politics.[55] As religious scholar C. Eric Lincoln points out, "for African Americans, a people whose total experience has been a sustained condition of multiform stress, religion is never far from the threshold of consciousness, for whether it is embraced with fervor or rejected with disdain, it is the focal element of the black experience."[56]

At the same time, the Black Church has also failed to challenge arguments about sexual deviancy. Instead, the Black Church has incorporated dominant ideas about the dangers of promiscuity and homosexuality within its beliefs and practices.[57] Some accuse the Black Church of relying on a double standard according to which teenaged girls are condemned for out-of-wedlock pregnancies but in which the men who fathered the children escape censure. The girls are often required to confess their sins and ask for forgiveness in front of the entire congregation whereas the usually older men who impregnate them are excused.[58] Others argue that the Black Church advances a hypocritical posture about homosexuality that undercuts its antiracist posture:

> Just as white people have misused biblical texts to argue that God supported slavery, and that being Black was a curse, the Bible has been misused by African Americans to justify the oppression of homosexuals. It is ironic that while they easily dismiss the Bible's problematic references to Black people, they accept without question what they perceive to be its condemnation of homosexuals.[59]

One reason that the Black Church has seemed so resistant to change is that it has long worried about protecting the community's image within the broader society and has resisted *any* hints of Black sexual deviance, straight and gay alike. Recognizing the toll that the many historical assaults against African American families have taken, many churches argue for traditional, patriarchal households, and they censure women who seemingly reject marriage and the male authority that creates them. For women, the babies who are born out of wedlock are irrefutable evidence for women's sexual transgression. Because women carry the visible stigma of sexual transgression—unlike men, they become pregnant and cannot hide their sexual histories—churches more often have chastised women for promiscuity. In a sense, Black churches historically preached a politics of respectability, especially regarding marriage and sexuality because they recognized how claims of Black promiscuity and immorality fueled racism. In a similar fashion, the Black Church's resistance to societal stigmatization of all African Americans as being sexually deviant limits its ability to take effective leadership within African American communities concerning all matters of sexuality, especially homosexuality. Black Churches were noticeably silent about the spread of HIV/AIDS among African Americans largely because they wished to avoid addressing the sexual mechanisms of HIV transmission (prostitution and gay sex).[60]

Within Black churches and Black politics, the main arguments given by African American intellectuals and community leaders that explain homosexuality's presence within African American communities show how closely Black political thought is tethered to an unexamined gender ideology. Backed up by interpretations of biblical teachings, many churchgoing African Americans believe that homosexuality reflects varying combinations of: (1) the loss of male role models as a consequence of the breakdown of the Black family structure, trends that in turn foster weak men, some of whom turn to homosexuality; (2) a loss of traditional religious values that encourages homosexuality among those who have turned away from the church; (3) the emasculation of Black men by White oppression; and (4) a sinister plot by White racists as a form of population genocide (neither gay Black men nor Black lesbians have children under this scenario).[61] Because these assumptions validate only one family form, this point of view works against both Black straights and gays alike. Despite testimony from children raised by Black single mothers, families headed by women alone routinely are seen as "broken homes" that somehow need fixing. This seemingly pro-family stance also works against LGBT African Americans. Gay men and lesbians have been depicted as threats to Black families, primarily due to the erroneous belief that gay, lesbian, and bisexual African Americans neither want nor have children or that they are not already part of family networks.[62] Holding fast to dominant ideology, many African American ministers believe that homosexuality is unnatural for Blacks and is actually a "white disease." As a result, out LGBT African Americans are seen as being disloyal to the race.

Historically, this combination of racial segregation and intolerance within African American communities that influenced Black Church activities explains the deeply closeted nature of LGBT Black experiences. The racial segregation of Jim Crow in the rural South and social institutions such as the Black Church that were created in this context made living as openly gay virtually impossible for LGBT African Americans. In small town and rural settings of the South, it made sense for the majority of LGBT Black people to remain deeply closeted. Where was the space for out Black lesbians in Anita Hill's close-knit segregated community of Lone Tree in which generations of women routinely gave birth to thirteen children? Would coming out as gay or bisexual Black men make any difference in resisting the threat of lynching in the late nineteenth century? In these contexts, Black homosexuality might have further derogated an already sexually stigmatized population. Faced with this situation, many African American gays, lesbians, and bisexuals saw heterosexual passing as the only logical choice.

Prior to early-twentieth-century migration to Northern cities, Black gays, lesbians, and bisexuals found it very difficult to reject heterosexuality outright. Cities provided more options, but for African Americans residential housing segregation further limited the options that did exist. Despite these limitations, gay and lesbian Black urban dwellers did manage to carve out new lives that differed from those they left behind. For example, the 1920s was a critical period for African American gays, lesbians, and bisexuals who were able to migrate to large cities like New York. Typically, the art and literary traditions of the Harlem Renaissance have been analyzed through a race-only Black cultural nationalist framework. But LGBT sexualities may have been far more important within Black urbanization than formerly believed. Because the majority of Harlem Renaissance writers were middle-class, a common assumption has been that their response to claims of Black promiscuity was to advance a politics of respectability.[63] The artists of the Harlem Renaissance appeared to be criticizing American racism, but they also challenged norms of gender and sexuality that were upheld by the politics of respectability.

Contemporary rereadings of key texts of the Harlem Renaissance suggest that many had a homoerotic or "queer" content. For example, new analyses locate a lesbian subtext within Pauline Hopkins's novel *Contending Forces*, a homoerotic tone within the short stories of Black life detailed in *Cane*, and an alternative sexuality expressed in the corpus of Langston Hughes's work.[64] British filmmaker Isaac Julien's 1989 prizewinning short film *Looking for Langston* created controversy via its association of Hughes with homoeroticism. Julien's intent was not to criticize Hughes, but rather, to "de-essentialize black identities" in ways that create space for more progressive sexual politics. At a conference on Black popular culture, Julien explains this process of recognizing different kinds of Black identities: "I think blackness is a term used—in the way that terms like 'the black community' or 'black folk' are usually bandied about—to exclude others who are part of that community . . . to create a more pluralistic interreaction [*sic*] in terms of difference, both sexual and racial, one has to start with deessentializing the notion of the black subject."[65] Basically, rejecting the erasure of gay Black male identities, Julien's project creates a space in which Hughes can be both Black and queer.

Middle-class African Americans may have used literary devices to confront gendered and sexual norms, but working-class and poor African Americans in cities also challenged these sexual politics, albeit via different mechanisms. During this same decade, working-class Black women blues singers also expressed gendered and sexual sensibilities that deviated from the politics of respectability.[66] One finds in the lyrics of the blues singers explicit references to gay, lesbian, and bisexual sexual expression as a natural part of lived Black experience. By proclaiming that "wild women don't get no blues," the new blues singers took on and reworked long-standing ideas about Black women's sexuality. Like most forms of popular music, Black blues lyrics talk about love. But, when compared to other American popular music of the 1920s and 1930s, Black women's blues were distinctive. One significant difference concerned the blues' "provocative and pervasive sexual—including homosexual—imagery."[67] The blues took on themes that were banished from popular music—extramarital affairs, domestic violence, and the short-lived nature of love relationships all appeared in Black women's blues. The theme of women loving women also appeared in Black women's blues, giving voice to Black lesbianism and bisexuality.

When it came to their acceptance of Black gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, urban African American neighborhoods exhibited contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, Black neighborhoods within large cities became areas of racial and sexual boundary-crossing that supported more visible lesbian and gay activities. For example, one community study of the lesbian community in Buffalo, New York, found racial and social class differences among lesbians. Because Black lesbians were confined to racially segregated neighborhoods, lesbians had more house parties and social gatherings within their neighborhoods. In contrast, White working-class lesbians were more likely to frequent bars that, ironically, were typically located near or in Black neighborhoods.[68] In her autobiography *Zami*, Audre Lorde describes the racial differences framing lesbian activities in New York City in the 1950s where interracial boundaries were crossed, often for the first time.[69] These works suggest that African American lesbians constructed sexual identities within African American communities in urban spaces. The strictures placed on all African American women who moved into White-controlled space (the threat of sexual harassment and rape) affected straight and lesbian women alike. Moreover, differences in male and female socialization may have made it easier for African American women to remain closeted within African American communities. Heterosexual and lesbian women alike value intimacy and friendship with their female relatives, their friends, and their children. In contrast, dominant views of masculinity condition men to compete with one another. Prevailing ideas about masculinity encourage Black men to reject close male friendships that come too close to homoerotic bonding.

On the other hand, the presence of Black gay, lesbian, and bisexual activities and enclaves within racially segregated neighborhoods did not mean that LGBT people experienced acceptance. Greatly influenced by Black Church teachings, African Americans may have accepted homosexual individuals, but they disapproved of homosexuality itself. Relations in the Black Church illustrate this stance of grudging acceptance. While censuring homosexuality, Black churches have also not banished LGBT people from their congregations. Within the tradition of some Church leaders, homosexuality falls under the rubric of pastoral care and is not considered a social justice issue. Ministers often preach, "love the sinner but hate the sin."[70] This posture of "don't be too out and we will accept you" has had a curious effect on churches themselves as well as on African American antiracist politics. For example, the Reverend Edwin C. Sanders, a founding pastor of the Metropolitan Interdenominational Church in Nashville, describes this contradiction of accepting LGBT Black people, just as long as they are not too visible. As Reverend Sanders points out: "the unspoken message... says it's all right for you to be here, just don't say anything, just play your little role. You can be in the choir, you can sit on the piano bench, but don't say you're gay."[71] Reverend Sanders describes how this policy limited the ability of Black churches to deal with the spreading HIV/AIDS epidemic. He notes how six Black musicians within Black churches died of AIDS, yet churches hushed up the cause of the deaths. As Reverend Sanders observes, "Nobody wanted to deal with the fact that all of these men were gay black men, and yet they'd been leading the music for them."[72]

The dual challenges to racism and heterosexism in the post–civil rights era have provided LGBT Black people with both more legal rights within American society (that hopefully will translate into improved levels of security) and the potential for greater acceptance within African American communities. As a result, a visible and vocal Black LGBT presence emerged in the 1980s and 1990s that challenged the seeming separateness of racism and heterosexism in ways that unsettled heterosexual Black people and gay White people alike. Rejecting the argument that racism and heterosexism come together solely or even more intensively for LGBT African Americans, LGBT African American people highlighted the connections and contradictions that characterize racism and heterosexism as mutually constructing systems of oppression. Working in this intersection between these two systems, LGBT African Americans raised important issues about the workings of racism and heterosexism.

One issue concerns how race complicates the closeting process and resistance to it. Just as Black people's ability to break out of prison differed based on gender, class, age, and sexuality, LGBT people's ability to come out of the closet displays similar heterogeneity. As LGBT African Americans point out, the contours of the closet and the costs attached to leaving it vary according to race, class, and gender. For many LGBT Whites, sexual orientation is all that distinguishes them from the dominant White population. Affluent gay White men, for example, may find it easier to come out of the closet because they still maintain many of the benefits of White masculinity. In contrast, in part because of a multiplicity of identities, African American gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered individuals seem less likely than their White counterparts to be openly gay or to consider themselves completely out of the closet.[73] Race complicates the coming-out process. As Kevin Boykin recalls, "coming out to my family members, I found, was much more difficult than coming out to my friends. Because my family had known me longer than my friends had, I thought they at least deserved to hear the words 'I'm gay' from my own lips.... On the other hand, precisely because my family, had known and loved me as one person, I worried that they might not accept me as another. Would they think I had deceived them for years?"[74] Gender and age add further layers of complexity to the coming-out process, as the difficulties faced by African American lesbians and gay African American high school youth suggest.[75]

Another related issue concerns the endorsement of "passing" and/or assimilation as possible solutions to racial and sexual discrimination. Black LGBT people point to the contradictions of passing in which, among African Americans, racial passing is routinely castigated as denying one's true self, yet sexual passing as heterosexual is encouraged. Barbara Smith, a lesbian activist who refused to remain in the closet, expresses little tolerance for lesbians who are willing to reap the benefits of others' struggles, but who take few risks themselves:

> A handful of out lesbians of color have gone into the wilderness and hacked through the seemingly impenetrable jungle of homophobia. Our closeted sisters come upon the wilderness, which is now not nearly as frightening, and walk the path we have cleared, even pausing at times to comment upon the beautiful view. In the meantime, we are on the other side of the continent, hacking through another jungle. At the very least, people who choose to be closeted can speak out against homophobia.... [Those] who protect their closets never think about... how their silences contribute to the silencing of others.[76]

Even if the "wilderness" is not nearly as frightening as it once was, the seeming benefits of remaining closeted and passing as straight may be more illusory than real. Because of the ability of many LGBT individuals to pass as straight, they encounter distinctive forms of prejudice and discrimination. Here racism and heterosexism differ. Blackness is clearly identifiable, and in keeping with assumptions of color blindness of the new racism, many Whites no longer express derogatory racial beliefs in public, especially while in the company of Blacks. They may, however, express such beliefs in private or behind their backs. In contrast, U.S. society's assumption of heterosexuality along with its tolerance of homophobia imposes no such public censure on straight men and women to refrain from homophobic comments in public. As a result, closeted and openly LGBT people may be exposed to a much higher degree of interpersonal insensitivity and overt prejudice in public than the racial prejudice experienced by Blacks and other racial/ethnic groups.[77]

Black churches and African American leaders and organizations that held fast in the past to the view of "don't be too out and we will accept you" faced hostile external racial climates that led [them] to suppress differences among African Americans, ostensibly in the name of racial solidarity. This version of racial solidarity also drew upon sexist and heterosexist beliefs to shape political agendas for all Black people. For example, by organizing the historic 1963 March on Washington where Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his legendary "I Have a Dream Speech," African American civil rights leader Bayard Rustin played a major role in the civil rights movement. Yet because Rustin was an out gay man, he was seen as a potential threat to the movement itself. Any hint of sexual impropriety was feared. So Rustin stayed in the background, while Martin Luther King, Jr. maintained his position as spokesperson and figurehead for the march and the movement. But the question for today is whether holding these views on race, gender, and sexuality makes political sense in the greatly changed context of the post–civil rights era. In a context where out-of-wedlock births, poverty, and the spread of STDs threaten Black survival, preaching abstinence to teens who define sexuality only in terms of genital sexual intercourse or encouraging LGBT people to renounce the sin of homosexuality and "just be straight" simply miss the mark. Too much is at stake for Black antiracist projects to ignore sexuality and its connections to oppressions of race, class, gender, and age any longer.

RACISM AND HETEROSEXISM REVISITED

On May 11, 2003, a stranger killed fifteen-year-old Sakia Gunn who, with four friends, was on her way home from New York's Greenwich Village. Sakia and her friends were waiting for the bus in Newark, New Jersey, when two men got out of a car, made sexual advances, and physically attacked them. The women fought back, and when Gunn told the men that she was a lesbian, one of them stabbed her in the chest.

Sakia Gunn's murder illustrates the connections among class, race, gender, sexuality, and age. Sakia lacked the protection of social class privilege. She and her friends were waiting for the bus in the first place because none had access to private automobiles that offer protection for those who are more affluent. In Gunn's case, because her family initially did not have the money for her funeral, she was scheduled to be buried in a potter's grave. Community activists took up a collection to pay for her funeral. She lacked the gendered protection provided by masculinity. Women who are perceived to be in the wrong place at the wrong time are routinely approached by men who feel entitled to harass and proposition them. Thus, Sakia and her friends share with all women the vulnerabilities that accrue to women who negotiate public space. She lacked the protection of age—had Sakia and her friends been middle-aged, they may not have been seen as sexually available. Like African American girls and women, regardless of sexual orientation, they were seen as approachable. Race was a factor, but not in a framework of interracial race relations. Sakia and her friends were African American, as were their attackers. In a context where Black men are encouraged to express a hyper-heterosexuality as the badge of Black masculinity, women like Sakia and her friends can become important players in supporting patriarchy. They challenged Black male authority, and they paid for the transgression of refusing to participate in scripts of Black promiscuity. But the immediate precipitating catalyst for the violence that took Sakia's life was her openness about her lesbianism. Here, homophobic violence was the prime factor. Her death illustrates how deeply entrenched homophobia can be among many African American men and women, in this case, beliefs that resulted in an attack on a teenaged girl.

How do we separate out and weigh the various influences of class, gender, age, race, and sexuality in this particular incident? Sadly, violence against Black girls is an everyday event. What made this one so special? Which, if any, of the dimensions of her identity got Sakia Gunn killed? There is no easy answer to this question, because *all* of them did. More important, how can any Black political agenda that does not take *all* of these systems into account, including sexuality, ever hope adequately to address the needs of Black people as a collectivity? One expects racism in the press to shape the reports of this incident. In contrast to the 1998 murder of Matthew Shepard, a young, White, gay man in Wyoming, no massive protests, nationwide vigils, and renewed calls for federal hate crimes legislation followed Sakia's death. But what about the response of elected and appointed officials? The African American mayor of Newark decried the crime, but he could not find the time to meet with community activists who wanted programmatic changes to retard crimes like Sakia's murder. The principal of her high school became part of the problem. As one activist described it, "students at Sakia's high school weren't allowed to hold a vigil. And the kids wearing the rainbow flag were being punished like they had on gang colors."[78]

Other Black leaders and national organizations spoke volumes through their silence. The same leaders and organizations that spoke out against the police beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles area police, the rape of immigrant Abner Louima by New York City police, and the murder of Timothy Thomas by Cincinnati police said nothing about Sakia Gunn's death. Apparently, she was just another unimportant little Black girl to them. But to others, her death revealed the need for a new politics that takes the intersections of racism and heterosexism as well as class exploitation, age discrimination, and sexism into account. Sakia was buried on May 16 and a crowd of approximately 2,500 people attended her funeral. The turnout was unprecedented: predominantly Black, largely high school students, and mostly lesbians. Their presence says that as long as African American lesbians like high school student Sakia Gunn are vulnerable, then every African American woman is in danger; and if all Black women are at risk, then there is no way that any Black person will ever be truly safe or free.

NOTES

1. The field of postcolonial studies contains many works that examine how ideas generally, and sexual discourse in particular, was essential to colonialism and to nationalism. In this field, the works of French philosopher Michel Foucault have been pivotal in challenging prior frameworks heavily grounded in Marxism and in Freudian psychoanalysis. Here I rely on two main ideas from the corpus of Foucault's work. The first, expressed in his classic work *Discipline and Punish,* concerns the strategies that institutions use to discipline populations and get them to submit under conditions of oppression (Foucault 1979). The second idea concerns the normalization of such power through the use of hegemonic ideologies. Volume I of Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* uses sexuality to illustrate this normalization of power (Foucault 1980). Despite the enormous impact that Foucault has had on studies of power, few works analyze his treatment of race. Ann Stoler's *Race and the Education of Desire* is exemplary in this regard (Stoler 1995). Stoler examines how Foucault's analyses of sexuality in European societies can be read also as an analysis of race. In this chapter, I rely on many of Stoler's insights. For a comprehensive overview of works on Foucault and sexuality that do not deal with race, see Stoler 1995, 19, n. 1. For a description of the specific manipulation of sexual discourse within colonialism, see McClintock 1995; Gilman 1985; and Young 1995, 90–117.
2. Jordan 1968, 3–43.
3. Jordan 1968, 136–178.
4. See, for example, White 1985a.
5. Despite the marginality of all LGBT Black people, subpopulations did not place issues of sexuality on the public agenda at the same time or in the same way. Black lesbians raised issues of heterosexism and homophobia in the 1980s, fairly early in modern Black feminism. For classic work in this tradition, see Combahee River Collective 1982; Lorde 1982; Smith 1983; and Clarke 1983. For a representative sample of more recent works, see Clarke 1995; Gomez and Smith 1994; Moore 1997; Gomez 1999; Greene 2000; Smith 1998. In contrast, works by gay Black men achieved greater prominence later. See, for example, Hemphill 1991; Riggs 1992. *Tongues Untied,* the documentary by the late Marlon Riggs, represents an important path breaking work in Black gay men's studies in the United States (*Tongues Untied* 1989). More recently, work on Black masculinity that analyzes homosexuality has gained greater visibility. See Hutchinson 1999; Riggs 1999; Thomas 1996; Carbado 1999c; Hawkeswood 1996; Simmons 1991.
6. Cohen and Jones 1999, 88.
7. Mandela 1994, 341. Foucault suggests that the prison serves as an exemplar of modern Western society (Foucault 1979). The techniques used to discipline and punish deviant populations constitute a punishment industry. Prisons operate by controlling populations via disciplining the body. Foucault's work on sexuality also emphasizes regularization and discipline, only this time via creating discourses of sexuality that also aim to control the body (Foucault 1980). For an analysis of Foucault's treatment of race, sexuality, and gender, see Stoler 1995.
8. Wideman 1984, 52.
9. For works that detail the effects of welfare state policies on African Americans, see Quadagno 1994; Brewer 1994; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001. For general works on state policy and African American economic well-being, see Squires 1994; Massey and Denton 1993; Oliver and Shapiro 1995. For analyses of jobs and urban economies, see Wilson 1996; 1987.
10. West 1993.
11. In the 1980s, homicide became one of the leading causes of death of young Black men (Oliver 1994). For work on the vulnerability of Black youth in inner cities, see Anderson 1978; 1990; 1999; Canada 1995; Kaplan 1997; Kitwana 2002.
12. Anderson 1999.
13. Anderson 1999.
14. Anderson 1978; 1990; 1999.
15. As quoted in Cole and Guy-Sheftall 2003, 139.
16. Mandela 1994, 367–368.
17. Mandela 1994, 341.
18. Rose 1994, 21–61; George 1998, 1–21.
19. Sociologist Steve Seidman traces the emergence and decline of the closet as a metaphor describing contemporary LGBT politics (Seidman 2002). Seidman dates the closet as reaching its heyday in the 1950s and early 1960s during the early years of the cold war. In his research, he was surprised to find that many contemporary gay Americans live outside the social framework of the closet. Seidman suggests that the two main ways that gay life has been understood since 1969, namely, the coming-out narrative or the migration to gay ghettoes, may no longer be accurate: "as the lives of at least some gays look more like those of straights, as gays no longer feel compelled to migrate to urban enclaves to feel secure and respected, gay identity is often approached in ways similar to heterosexual identity—as a thread" (Seidman 2002, 11). Unfortunately, Seidman's methodology did not allow him to explore the ways in which Black LGBT people have similar and different experiences.

20. Both science and religion advanced different justifications for stigmatizing homosexuals. Until recently, Western medicine and science viewed sexuality as being biologically hardwired into the human species and obeying natural laws. Heterosexual sexual practices and reproduction were perceived as the "natural" state of sexuality, and all other forms of sexual expression were classified as deviant. Religion offered similar justifications. Promiscuity and homosexuality emerged as important categories of "unnatural" sexual activity that normalized monogamous heterosexuality within the context of marriage and for purposes of reproduction.
21. This is Foucault's argument about biopower, the normalization of practices that enable society to discipline individual bodies, in this case, sexual bodies, and groups, in this case, straights and gays, as population groups that become comprehensible only in the context of discourses of sexuality. This view prevailed until shifts within the study of sexuality in the 1980s and 1990s.
22. Seidman 1996, 6.
23. The term *queer* often serves as an umbrella term for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and anyone else whose sexuality transgresses the status quo. Not everyone claims the term as an identity or statement of social location. Some argue that the term erases social and economic differences among lesbians and gay men, and others consider it to be derogatory. Still others use the term to acknowledge the limitless possibilities of an individual's sexuality. They see terms such as *gay*, *lesbian*, and *bisexual* as misleading in that they suggest stable sexual identities. Beyond these ideological differences, I do not use the term *queer* here because LGBT African American people do not prefer this term. When participants in the *National Black Pride Survey 2000* were asked which label from a very extensive list came closest to describing their sexual orientation, 42 percent self-identified as gay, 24 percent chose lesbian, 11 percent chose bisexual, and 1 percent marked transgendered. In contrast to high levels of agreement on gay and lesbian, "queer" was one of the least popular options (1 percent). As the survey reports, "Black GLBT people do not readily, or even remotely, identity as 'queer'" (Battle et al. 2002, 19).
24. LGBT politics and the "queering" of sexuality has been one important dimension of the post-civil rights era and Seidman contends that the postcloseted world of the post–civil rights era has shown greater acceptance of LGBT people. Yet, suggests Seidman, acceptance may come with a price. Today, LGBT people are under intense pressure to fit the mold of the "good gay citizen" to be monogamous and to look and act normal. This image may be safe, but it continues to justify discrimination against those who do not achieve this ideal (Seidman 2002).
25. Here I use the framework of "domains of power" to examine the convergence of racism and heterosexism. Briefly, race, sexuality, gender, class, and other systems of oppression are all organized through four main domains of power. The structural domain of power (institutional policies), the disciplinary of power (the rules and regulations that regulate social interaction), the hegemonic domain of power (the belief systems that defend existing power arrangements), and the interpersonal domain of power (patterns of everyday social interaction) are organized differently for different systems of oppression. Here I use this model as a heuristic device to build an argument about the interconnections of racism and heterosexism. For a discussion of the framework and its applicability in Black feminist politics, see chapter 12 of *Black Feminist Thought* (Collins 2000a, 273–290).
26. For a discussion of the *Loving* decision and its effects on interracial marriage, see Root 2001. For the full definition of the Defense of Marriage Act, see U.S. Census Bureau 2000.
27. Racism and heterosexism share this basic cognitive frame, and it is one shared by other systems of power.
28. Clarke 1983.
29. Both sets of ideas also serve as markers for constructing both heterosexuality and homosexuality within the wider society. Prior to the social movements of the civil rights era that called increased attention to both racism and heterosexism, racial protest was contained within the prisons of racially segregated neighborhoods and LGBT protest within the invisibility of individual closets.
30. Mudimbe 1988; Appiah 1992.
31. Young 1995, 90–117; McClintock 1995.
32. Jordan 1968, 7.
33. Jordan 1968, 5. Jordan suggests that the reactions of the English differed from those of the Spanish and the Portuguese who for centuries had been in close contact with North Africa and who had been invaded by peoples both darker and more civilized than themselves. The impact of color on the English may have been more powerful because England's principal contact with Africans came in West Africa and the Congo, areas with very dark-skinned Africans. Thus, "one of the fairest-skinned nations suddenly came face to face with one of the darkest peoples on earth" (Jordan 1968, 6).
34. Torgovnick 1990, 18–20.
35. Historically, scientific racism has made important contributions to creating and sustaining myths of Black promiscuity as well as constructing a normalized heterosexuality juxtaposed to the alleged deviancy of White homosexuality. The scientific racism of medicine, biology, psychology, anthropology, and other social sciences constructed both Black promiscuity as well as homosexuality and then spent inordinate time assisting state and religious institutions that aimed to regulate these practices. For general discussions of race and science, see Gould 1981; Harding 1993; Zuberi 2001.
36. Fausto-Sterling 1995.
37. Foucault 1979.
38. Haraway 1989, 262. In this context, studying animals that were clearly not human but close to it might reveal what granted Europeans their humanity and Africans their putative bestiality. Here the interest in animal behavior as a form of human behavior uninterrupted by culture appears. Within primatology, monkeys and apes have a privileged relation to nature and culture, in that "simians occupy the border zones" (Haraway 1989, 1). "In Africa, the primate literature was produced by white colonists and western foreign scientists under no pressure until well after independence to develop scientific, collegial relations with black Africans. African primates, including the people imagined as wildlife, modeled the 'origin of man' for European-derived culture. . . . Africa became a place of darkness, one lacking the enlightenment of the West. India has been used to model not the 'origin of man,' but the 'origin of civilization.' Both are forms of 'othering' for western symbolic operations, but their differences matter" (Haraway 1989, 262).
39. Collins 2000a, 69–96.
40. Wiegman 1993, 239.
41. Quoted in Kapsalis 1997, 37. Understandings of Black women's promiscuity also build upon a deep historical theme within Western societies that links deviant sexuality with disease. The hypervisible, pathologized portion of Black women's sexuality centered on the icon of the whore, the woman who demands money for sexual favors. This image is pathologized in that prostitutes were associated with ideas about disease and pollution that bore stark resemblance to ideas about the threat of racial pollution so central to conceptions of whiteness grounded in purity (Giddings 1992, 419).
42. Baker 1993, 43.
43. Baker 1993, 33–60.
44. Dwyer 2002. This case also resembles the well-known case of the Scottsboro boys in which a group of Black men were convicted of allegedly raping White women. They too were eventually exonerated.
45. White 1985a.
46. Gould 1981; Zucchino 1997; Amott 1990; Brewer 1994; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001.

47. Roberts 1997, 4.
48. In a context in which the United States has the highest teen pregnancy rate in the Western world, the even higher rates of teen pregnancy among African American adolescents is a cause for alarm. Many factors influence high rates of pregnancy among young Black women. For example, adult men, some of whom may have coerced girls to have sex with them, father most of the babies born to teen mothers. Studies show that as many as one in four girls are victims of sexual abuse (Roberts 1997, 117).
49. See Gould 1981; Lubiano 1992; Zucchino 1997; Neubeck and Cazenave 2001.
50. Roberts 1997, 152.
51. As quoted in Cole and Guy-Sheftall 2003, 165.
52. For a discussion of the type of racial reasoning that generates ideas of racial authenticity, see Cornel West's "The Pitfalls of Racial Reasoning" (West 1993, 21–32).
53. These same pressures fostered views of homosexuals as invisible, closeted, and assumed to be White. Normalized White heterosexuality became possible and hegemonic only within the logic of both racism and heterosexism.
54. The general use of the term "the Black Church" refers to Black Christian churches in the United States. This includes any Black Christian who worships and is a member of a Black congregation. The formal use of the term refers to independent, historic, and Black-controlled denominations that were founded after the Free African Society in 1787. For a listing, see Monroe 1998, 297, n. 1. For a general history of the Black Church, see Lincoln 1999. For analyses of Black women's participation in the Black Church, see Douglas 1999; Gilkes 2001; Higginbotham 1993.
55. See, Patillo-McCoy 1999, especially Patillo-McCoy 1998.
56. Lincoln 1999, xxiv.
57. Douglas 1999.
58. Cole and Guy-Sheftall 2003, 116.
59. Cole and Guy-Sheftall 2003, 120.
60. Cohen 1999, 276–288.
61. Simmons 1991.
62. For a discussion of the family networks of Black gay men in Harlem, see Hawkeswood 1996. Also, see Battle et al. 2002, 13–17.
63. Higginbotham 1993, 185–229.
64. Somerville 2000.
65. Julien 1992, 274.
66. Davis 1998.
67. Davis 1998, 3.
68. Kennedy and Davis 1994.
69. Lorde 1982.
70. Monroe 1998, 281.
71. Comstock 1999, 156.

72. Comstock 1999, 156.
73. Boykin 1996, 90.
74. Boykin 1996, 19.
75. Moore 1997; McCready 2001.
76. Smith 1990, 66.
77. Boykin 1996, 81.
78. "Skeleton in Newark's Closet: Laquetta Nelson Is Forcing Homophobia Out into the Open" 2003.

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