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# Examining the Embodied Sexual Experiences of Heterosexual African-American Women

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## DEDICATION

To the memory of my parents, Lien Mai Hughes and Ken Hughes.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Examining the Embodied Sexual Experiences of Heterosexual African-American Women

by

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Extant research on African-American women's sexuality is typically couched within the public health literature. Evidence of African-American women's high rates of sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS, and unwanted pregnancies is used to socially regulate and punish women of color, such as through forced sterilization. The construction of African-American women's sexuality continues to serve as a linchpin of racial difference in a supposedly "post-racial" era. Challenging this line of research, Black feminist scholars have called for more critical research that acknowledges how race, gender, and class profoundly shape matters of sexuality. Past research has tended to focus on African-American women's sexual attitudes and socialization by family, peers, and media. However, relatively little attention has focused on how intersecting social inequalities shape intimate experiences and more specifically, the social conditions that lead to increased sexual subjectivity for women of color. This study builds on the trailblazing work of Black feminists by identifying social-structural factors that shape Black women's sexual experiences.

Chapter 4 explores women's conceptualizations of sexual pleasure. Given the taboo of women's pleasure in society, particularly for racially marginalized women, little research has examined how sexual pleasure factors into women's sexual lives. Women conceptualize sexual pleasure as partner, purpose, or process. This contributes to the literature by underscoring the variations in Black women's beliefs about sexual pleasure and challenging the predominant assumptions of Black women's sexuality as dangerous, risky, or immoral.

Chapter 5 examines the cultural stereotypes surrounding Black women's sexuality and how women manage the stigma of Black women's deviant sexuality. I find that women contend with cultural beliefs of Black women's asexuality or hypersexuality, which both construct Black women as not ideal sexual partners. Women draw on one of two techniques to manage negative stereotypes: by minimizing the stereotypes as salient in their sexual lives or by challenging them and subscribing to gendered arrangements in relationships. However, women must perform labor to shed this stigma and decrease their sexual agency.

Chapter 6 focuses on Black women's sexual body image. I argue that Black women contend with the "thick imperative," or expectations to possess a curvier body. However, the "thick imperative" conflicts with the dominant ideal of thinness, which many voiced as a perennial concern in their lives. Therefore, I highlight how Black women must navigate two opposing ideals, which ultimately leads to increased frustration and body anxieties in their lives.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

The sexual stories that black women long to tell […] [have] not yet begun.
- Tricia Rose, *Longing to Tell* (2003)

The legacy of racial discrimination has subjected African-American women to oppressive social practices that have regulated and controlled their sexuality (Collins 2005). Societal stereotypes of African-American women cast them as sexually "deviant" and jeopardizing the moral order, thus justifying their social control (Hill 2005; Nash 2011). Some contemporary sex research has also reinforced the social control of African-American women's sexuality by focusing on negative sexual outcomes and constructing their sexuality as "non-normative" (McGruder 2009). For example, African-American women's disproportionate rates of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS are commonly cited in the public health literature, constructing race and gender as predictive risk factors (CDC 2014a). However, Black feminist scholars have long challenged (within academia and the larger society) these negative representations of African-American women's sexuality that continue to reproduce their subordinate social status (Bowleg, Lucas, and Tschann 2004; Collins 2005; Hill 2009; Kwate and Threadcraft 2015; Strings 2015). Black feminist scholars call for the contextualization of African-American women's sexuality to illuminate how social inequalities (e.g., race, gender, and class) intersect and shape their sexual experiences, sexual subjectivity, and overall well-being (Hill 2009).

Informed by the intersection of critical race feminist perspective, embodiment theory, and Black feminist scholarship, the present study focuses on heterosexual African-American women's sexuality, addressing how broader social factors shape women's partnered sexual experiences. This study addresses unresolved questions in the literature: How do gender, race, and class shape heterosexual African-American women's subjective sexual experiences? How do African-American women conceptualize sexual pleasure? What is the role of body image in their sexual experiences, particularly given that African-American women generally have positive body image but report negative sexual experiences (Fahs and Swank 2011; Gonzales and Roslin 2005; Wyatt and Lyons-Rowe 1990)?

This study contributes to the dialogue in Black feminist scholarship in several ways. First, this study examines heterosexual African-American women's experiences with sex, including negative experiences and positive experiences, particularly focusing under what conditions pleasurable, satisfying sex occurs. Second, this study explores one possible factor that shapes African-American women's sexual experiences: body image. Furthermore, this study improves on prior studies by examining body image through women's subjective description of their body as opposed to relying on the biomedical measure of body-mass index (BMI), as well as examining multiple dimensions of body image (physical appearance, health, and physical ability) and their link to subjective sexual experience. Third, this study will utilize African-American women's subjective accounts of their sexual experiences instead of objective measures of sexuality and broaden our understanding of their sexuality (Wyatt and Lyons-Rowe 1990). Last, this

study examines whether and how African-American women's narratives of sexual experience demonstrate resistance (and/or complicity) to dominant ideologies of African-American women's sexuality (e.g., race and gender).

In sum, guided by critical race feminist theory and Black feminist scholarship, this dissertation empirically examines through qualitative methods a racially subordinated group that has historically experienced racialized social control of their sexuality. In this dissertation, I address the following research questions:

*Question 1*: How do heterosexual African-American women subjectively experience sex? How do they conceptualize sexual pleasure?

1a. What expectations of sex do they have? Are the women's expectations met?

*Question 2*: How are heterosexual African-American women racialized and sexualized? How do Black women cope with stigma (i.e., stigma management)?

*Question 3*: What is Black women's sexual body image? How do women evaluate their bodies and by what criteria (i.e., dominant body ideal and/or cultural body ideal)? And how does their sexual body image shape their sexual encounters?

3a. What types of messages do they receive from their romantic partners about their body? Do they internalize these messages? Do their partner's messages affect their sexual body image?

## CHAPTER 2

### Background and Significance

To lay the foundation for the proposed research, this section describes the study's theoretical framework, reviews the literature on heterosexual African-American women's sexuality and body image, and specifies the contributions of the proposed study.

### Theoretical Framework

This section addresses the theoretical perspectives that have been used to study the body and provides a rational for using embodiment theory to guide the proposed research.

The social approach to the body developed in response to essentialist claims of the biological determinist approach, which argued that the body is composed of biological processes that are objective, hard-wired, and fixed (Segal 1994) and that these "natural" processes wholly determine bodily experiences and outcomes (Birke 2000; Fausto-Sterling 2000; Tolman, Bowman, and Fahs 2014). Now the dominant sociological approach to gender, the social approach contends that social, rather than biological, processes shape the body. Scholars who adopt this approach have elucidated how the human body is not fixed, but rather "culturally contingent and changeable" (Birke 2000: 32). For instance, the ways in which we understand the natural world (e.g., biology) are gendered and thus, transmit gendered assumptions (Fausto-Sterling 2000). As opposed to biological claims that constitute bodies as unchanging across all time and spaces, scholars (in particular those from the social constructionist camp) direct attention to how social and cultural factors mediate bodies and thus, bodies are not passive or unchanging

(Hanna 2010; Shildrick 2005). While the biological determinist and social constructionist frameworks clash, inviting debates about the "nature versus nurture" dichotomy (Langer 1989), both approaches in their "pure form" are inadequate to explain the entirety of bodily experiences (Tolman et al. 2014: 4) and create an impasse in the scholarship (Lock 1993). In response, some scholars have promoted embodiment as an alternative theoretical perspective, not to settle the debate once and for all, but to examine physical bodily experiences as structured within social relations of power (Duncan 1994; Monaghan 2005; Tolman 2006; Tolman et al. 2014). Through these power relations social inequalities are inscribed onto bodies.

### *Embodiment Theory*

Embodiment theory derives from post-structuralist theorists, such as Foucault (1969, 1975, 1980) and Butler (1990, 1993), to incorporate the body in social theory as a site of power struggles. Foucault's theory of power argues that ideological domination operates at the site of the body through disciplinary practices controlling people's movements (1975, 1980). Challenging the "juridico-discursive" model that posits that power is possessed by a few, centrally located, flows from the top to the bottom, and is repressive in nature, Foucault contends that modern power is dispersed, non-hierarchical, fragmented, polyvalent, and often difficult to locate, as illustrated in the panopticon, causing people to keep their bodies and bodily behaviors in control or engage in "self-surveillance" (1975). Through this panopticon metaphor, Foucault shifts the focus of *who* possesses power to the power relations *themselves* (Sawicki 1991). Therefore, modern power governs through people's self-surveillance of the body, producing "docile bodies"

that are subject to the normalizing gaze where anyone could be watching (Foucault 1975). As such, the modern tactics to discipline bodies are often subtle, as opposed to tactics from the past, which relied on violence and coercion (or the threat of them) to realize people's conformity. In a modern and thus, disciplinarian society, however, the modern tactics more effectively and insidiously transform the mind to comply with authority (Bartky 1997).

Modern power also produces normative discourses of sexuality that effectively shape ways of understanding sexuality and operate to regulate and monitor individuals (Foucault 1980). In an effort to control sexuality in society, domination operates through these normalizing discourses of sexuality that categorize people in terms of sexual practices, desires, and identities (Foucault 1980). These discourses function to establish hierarchies of sexuality, constituting sexually appropriate (as well as sexually deviant) practices, desires, and identities (Foucault 1980. Furthermore, people internalize these discourses (Foucault 1980).

Embodiment theory provides a social explanation of bodily experiences. Embodiment is generally defined as "being embodied," having an awareness of corporeal sensations and experiences, and "embodying the social" – that is, how historical and social oppressions are experienced through the body (Tolman et al. 2014: 18). "Being embodied" and "embodying the social" are not mutually exclusive; they can operate alone or simultaneously. Embodiment is a useful framework to examine the body as a site of power relations, especially as the body figures prominently as a site of sexual desire and pleasure (Butler 1993). While in social theory "the body" is often lost in abstraction

(Plummer 2003), embodiment brings individuals' bodily experiences to the fore (Waskul and Vannini 2006). It challenges the idea of pre-social bodies and argues that people can only understand their bodies through discourse, as bodily practices are conditioned and mediated by social forces (Bordo 1993; Foucault 1980; Segal 1994; Waskul and Vannini 2006). Thus, this theory highlights how people can only know of their lived bodily experiences through existing knowledge and discourse, and it illuminates how bodies are socially mediated, as opposed to biologically determined, by gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability (Spelman 1990).

### *Embodied Gender*

While embodiment theory's roots are in post-structuralism (Butler 1990; Foucault 1969, 1975), the sociological literature has also contributed to understandings of the body, primarily through the "doing gender" approach (West and Zimmerman 1987). This approach reveals how gender is created, reinforced, and managed through daily interactions, as opposed to a purely biological process (West and Zimmerman 1987). That people actively create gender through these "accomplishments" challenges the dominant belief that gender is a biological given or resides within the body. People perfect these social doings to produce the illusion of gender as natural and to avoid social sanctioning. Furthermore, social constructionists contend that biological sex - or the physiological body based on sex chromosomes, hormones, genitalia - is shaped by cultural ideas of gender (West and Zimmerman 1987). In other words, people are attributed as male or female based on their "presumed" biological sex (Crawley et al. 2008; West and Zimmerman 1987). Therefore, "we base our every assumptions about

biology on social characteristics" (Crawley et al. 2008: 42). This approach reinforces that gender is not biological, but rather a social practice or performance (West and Zimmerman 1987). While gender is socially constructed, and thus not "real," there are measurable inequalities produced by categorizing bodies as masculine or feminine that shape individuals' experiences (Crawley et al. 2008).

While this approach has powerfully transformed sociological thinking on gender (and sex), it has not been incorporated in studies of the body, even though bodies "do" gender or are "[agents] of social practice" (Messerschmidt 2009: 87). Prior literature has examined how individuals "do gender" through modifying their appearance externally, such as altering dress, adornment, and comportment, particularly as it relates to body image. However, examining how bodies physically "do gender" also reveals how bodies are altered internally through body modification processes such as dieting and exercising (Dworkin and Wachs 2009; Fahs and Swank 2015). Bodies that conform to gendered expectations are privileged in society while bodies that don't conform are stigmatized (Crawley et al. 2008). Therefore, it is imperative to acknowledge the body and the body's actions as shaped by broader cultural messages about gender. With a focus on the body in physical action, I extend the theoretical approach by examining the body's comportment in a physical practice that is sex.

### *Embodied Race and Intersectionality*

While feminist scholars have documented cases of gendered bodies, critical feminist race scholars challenge the dominant, dichotomous understanding of gendered bodies (i.e., masculine or feminine bodies), arguing that it does not address how bodies

also vary by race and class (Collins 2005; Crawley et al. 2008; JanHohamad 1992; McWhorter 1992; Stoler 1995). Intersectionality scholars, particularly Black feminists, acknowledge race, gender, class, and sexuality as interlocking systems of oppression (Collins 2000; Pyke and Johnson 2000) and critique the way that social categories have historically been treated as mutually exclusive categories or as having merely additive effects (Choo and Ferree 2010; Collins 1990, 2005; Crenshaw 1993; McCall 2005; Zinn and Dill 1996). Critical feminist race scholars provide a more inclusive paradigm to critique prior theories' exclusion of the experiences of women of color, particularly African-American women. They push researchers to study gender as co-constructed with race, class, and sexuality (Collins 1990; Nagel 2000; Pyke and Johnson 2003), to examine how gendered bodies are also racialized, classed, and sexualized, and to generate a more complete understanding of African-American women's bodies and embodied experiences. Thus, I bring a critical race feminist lens to embodiment theory by interrogating how African-American women's bodies are simultaneously gendered, racialized, classed, and sexualized. This approach acknowledges the interlocking nature of inequalities and brings an intersectional approach to sociological research on sexuality. It contrasts with some prior research which has either treated race as a secondary factor to gender (Gamson and Moon 2004) or situated race as a peripheral rather than the central factor (Stoler 1995). By examining the intersection of social statuses, I arrive at a broader understanding of heterosexual African-American women's sexual experiences and how social hierarchies of inequality shape bodies and bodily practices.

*Current State of Embodiment*

While embodiment theory has advanced knowledge of the body as subject to social norms and processes, several issues remain to be addressed. One area of embodiment theory in need of development concerns how to measure embodiment (Brown, Cromby, Harper, Johnson, and Reavey 2011; Byczkowska 2009; Fahs and Swank 2015; Shilling 2005). To date embodiment research has involved more theoretical than empirical work, and one area of challenge involves how to assess practices of the body that are largely non-verbally communicated, such as having sex (Byczkowska 2009). Scholars have called for empirical work that examines individual's subjective experiences and work that explores specific bodily practices to demonstrate the way social structures translate to physical bodies (Fahs and Swank 2015). The proposed addresses this call for empirical research by investigating African-American women's subjective accounts of their sexual experiences and examining sex as a bodily practice.

Recent studies on embodiment have focused on women's sexual selves, or "embodied sexuality" (Fahs 2011, 2014; Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, and Thomson 1994). Fahs (2011) finds that women described their most memorable sexual experience when they concentrated on the physical pleasures of their bodies, as opposed to focusing on their appearance, and when they felt fully present in the sexual encounter. These women constructed their bodies as conduits of physical sexual pleasure, which fostered an "intuitive relationship" between women and their bodies (Fahs 2011: 169). On the other hand, embodiment scholars attribute "disembodied sexuality" as occurring when women described self-surveillance of their appearance during sexual encounters and

when they felt detached from their bodies, which contributed to their unsatisfying sex (Holland et al. 1994). Therefore, "embodied sexuality," as opposed to bodily self-surveillance, figures prominently in women's narratives of pleasurable sexual experiences.

Another issue within embodiment theory is the notion of "embodied resistance" (Bobel and Kwan 2011; Fahs 2011; Fahs and Swank 2015). Much of the literature on embodiment has devoted attention to individuals' complicity to expectations of the body (e.g., through the presentation of a "socially acceptable body") or to individuals' embodiment of social structure (i.e., how oppression becomes embodied) (Fahs and Swank 2015). This prior work, however, has not fully examined whether and how individuals resist via their bodies, or how they are active agents in the shaping of their bodies. According to Foucault (1980), power and domination beget resistance and individuals challenge and potentially disrupt power structures. Recently, a growing cadre of scholars have begun to investigate how individuals' resistance reshapes their physical bodies as well as subverts dominant social norms. For example, research on "embodied resistance" where the body is a tool of resistance to dominant social norms has been documented through extreme body modifications (Pitts 2003, as cited in Bobel and Kwan 2011), women's decision not to remove body hair (Fahs and Delgado 2011, as cited in Bobel and Kwan 2011), and the fat acceptance movement (Gailey 2014).

However, while people are active agents in "embodied resistance" – they challenge and thereby violate socially sanctioned norms, they may unwittingly preserve the status quo structure by reinforcing body ideals (Fahs 2011); through extreme

deviation, they bring into relief the mainstream ideals, potentially naturalizing them. Therefore, it is imperative to examine how resistance operates within larger power structures and under what conditions resistance is made possible to avoid simplistic conceptualizations of resistance and complicity (Pyke 2010). The proposed study will contribute to the discussion of "embodied resistance" by examining whether and how African-American women resist race and gender power structures through their bodies, as indicated by how they evaluate their bodies and engage in sex. For example, some African- American women may adopt an alternative body ideal, one that depicts larger bodies as beautiful, and this may translate to more satisfying sexual experiences. Furthermore, I examine whether Black women's "embodied resistance" involves resistance to the gender structure, but complicity to the race structure or vice versa (Pyke 2010). For example, does African-American women's endorsement of a cultural body ideal resist dominant gender norms, but comply with racial norms of larger African-American bodies, which are then stigmatized by the dominant society?

I understand embodiment within the context of the proposed research as heterosexual African-American women's bodies potentially beholden and/or resistant to racial, gender, sexual, and class subordination. Therefore, broader social forces inform how Black women evaluate their bodies and give meaning to embodied experiences (e.g., sex, sexual body image). This study contributes to the theoretical literature by illustrating how social differences are projected on and experienced through bodies. I advance embodiment theory by providing an empirical analysis of Black women's complicity as

well as "embodied resistance" to ideologies that can reveal how larger structural forces are reinforced, challenged, and/or subverted.

## African-American Women's Sexuality

This section establishes the need for the research by reviewing prior research on African-American women's sexuality, which documents how racialized sexual stereotypes shape heterosexual African-American women's experiences and identity.

### *Conceptualizations of Sexuality*

Sexuality encompasses sexual orientation, sexual desires and attractions, sexual attitudes and values, and behaviors that are oriented towards sexual pleasure (Brotto, Heiman, and Tolman 2009; Green 2008; Meana 2010; Richters 2011). These domains are not discrete; rather, they intertwine and constitute one's sexuality. Sexuality offers women a host of potentially positive experiences, such as physical pleasure, emotional connection with a partner(s), exploration of sexual desire, and/or procreation (to name a few). At the same time, sexuality remains a site of potential oppression for women (Bartky 1997; Rich 1980; Rubin 1984; Segal 1994; Vance 1989).

Women's sexuality, and in particular, their sexual behavior, has historically been viewed as confined to traditional, heterosexual marriage, what Rubin (1984) describes as the "charmed circle." The nuclear family has been protected, supported, and encouraged by the state through social and economic rewards (Rubin 1984; Seidman 2003; Vance 1989). Western culture treats women's sexuality as dangerous when divorced from traditional marriage and family and fosters lay anxiety about women's sexual autonomy (Schwartz 2000). While women are socially constructed as embodying sex itself, they

must govern their own sexuality as well as its "public expression" (Vance 1989). Feminist scholars, in addition to queer and post-structuralist theorists, have critiqued the seeming "naturalness" and timelessness of sexual identities, arrangements, meanings, and practices (Duncan 1996; Gamson and Moon 2000; Moon 2008; Segal 1994; Seidman 2003), demonstrating how material and cultural forces shape sexuality (Gamson and Moon 2000: 48).

However, many scholars – in particular, Black feminists – have addressed the shortcomings of previous research on sexuality by contesting the construction of women's sexuality as predicated on white, middle-class, heterosexual women's experiences. These scholars have noted that the historical construction of (white) women's sexuality as passive and innocent is, for African-American women, unrealizable, due to dominant stereotypes of their sexuality as brazen, and fails to resonate with African-American women, given their historical experiences of slavery and sexual exploitation (Collins 2005; Hill 2005). The proposed study recognizes, as Black feminists have, that the construction of sexuality is not universal but rather, it varies by gender, race, class, and sexual orientation (Collins 2005; hooks 1992). Furthermore, it will illuminate that stratification structure by assessing the extent to which the dominant construction of sexuality (i.e., white) affects heterosexual African-American women's subjective sexual experience.

A limitation of much prior literature on sexuality – which has focused mainly on heterosexual sexuality – involves its conceptualization of sexual outcomes. Sexual satisfaction has been historically constructed as a predominantly mechanistic biological

response to sexual stimulation (Masters and Johnson 1966, as cited in Meana 2010) that occurs regardless of context. This construction reduces sexuality to biological responses detached from social life and reinforces the androcentric bias rooted in the scientific discourse of women's sexuality (Armstrong et al. 2012; Frith 2013). In contrast, a social constructionist approach recognizes that context matters. It considers how sex is socio-culturally produced, conditioned, and contingent upon time, space, and location (Frith 2013; Gamson and Moon 2004; Green 2008; Meana 2010; Moon 2008; Plummer 2003).

For example, research on heterosexual sex demonstrates that the "orgasm imperative" – that achieving orgasm is the logical, healthy, and natural (i.e., "functional") outcome of sex (especially during sexual intercourse) – casts sexual encounters without orgasms as dysfunctional (Frith 2013) and as a "failure" (Fahs 2014; Jackson and Scott 2007). However, sociologists have shown that orgasms, and in particular, women's orgasms, are conditioned by gendered power relations (Armstrong et al. 2012; Fahs 2011; Jackson and Scott 2007). The prevailing literature depicts the absence of women's orgasms as unhealthy and attributes the "problem" to women who are then presented as in need of medical intervention (Fahs 2014; Richters 2011). An alternative interpretation is that orgasms may not be essential to some or all women's sexual satisfaction and/or that the absence of orgasm may be attributable to the attitudes or behavior of the sex partner (i.e., in heterosexual encounters, a man). Research on women who fake orgasms indicates that they feel pressured to validate their partner's sexual skill and/or protect their partner's feelings at the expense of their own sexual enjoyment (Fahs 2011, 2014). Therefore, to extend our knowledge of heterosexual women's sexual satisfaction and

move beyond the essentialist and dichotomous "dys/function" framework (Fahs 2014), the proposed study will examine heterosexual African-American women's subjective sexual expectations and how they define their sexual satisfaction.

*"Controlling Images" of African-American Women's Sexuality: Deviance Embodied*

Historically, African-American women have been subjected to negative stereotypes generated by colonialism, slavery and racial discrimination (Collins 2005; Hill 2005, 2009; Stephen and Phillips 2003). While Western culture objectifies women to a greater extent relative to men (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997), racial categories take on qualitatively different constructions in terms of meanings and assumptions of sexuality wedded to women of color, particularly African-American women (Nagel 2000). During the era of slavery, the dominant ideology of their innate promiscuity (as African-American bodies were perceived as "closer to nature," more sexual, and threatening) served to justify enslavement and exploitation (Tolman et al. 2014: 764). African-American slave women possessed little to no reproductive control of their bodies and were raped by white slave owners for the purposes of reproduction to increase the supply of slave labor and sustain the capitalist system (Collins 2005; Dickerson and Rousseau 2009; Hill 2005). African-American slave women were constructed as objects of desire with powerful abilities to seduce white slave owners (Stephen and Phillips 2003). This "jezebel" stereotype of African-American women as wild, unrestrained sexual persons that "could be tamed but never completely subdued" served to justify slave owners' exploitation and fostered a legacy of systematic devaluation of Black womanhood (Collins 2005: 56) and precluded women's control of their sexuality.

Contemporary images of Black women as sexually deviant reflect the ongoing salience of past racial stereotypes. The media constructs African-American women's sexuality as deviant through "controlling images" that instruct viewers how to interpret their sexuality and bodies "on" and "off" screen (Collins 2000, 2005). These negative stereotypes devalue African-American women, presenting them as compromising heteronormative assumptions of (white) female sexuality (i.e., innocent and pure) (Collins 2005; Nash 2014; Stephens and Phillips 2003; Young 2014). Because white women's sexuality outlines the borders of ideal womanhood, racialization prevents African-American women from attaining "true womanhood" (Collins 2005). The construction of Black women's sexuality as deviant relies on the construction of white women's sexuality as ideal (Gamson and Moon 2004), suggesting that sexuality varies by race (Collins 2005; Craig 2002; Hammonds 1999; hooks 1992; Nagel 2000). Racial "difference" is not constructed as equal, but rather hierarchically and relationally. It is fundamental to the reproduction of African-American women's oppression (Collins 1986; Hammonds 2002; Nash 2014) and serves to reaffirm the hegemonic discourse of white sexuality as superior (Dickerson and Rosseau 2009; McGruder 2009).

These stereotypes continue to be recycled, widely dispersed, uncontested, and normalized by mass media (Hill 2009). The terrain of African-American women's sexuality is flooded with negative constructions, rendering women as pathological, savage, wild, and amoral (Carby 1992; Collins 2000, 2005; hooks 1992; Nash 2014; Parasecloi 2007; Stephen and Phillips 2003; Wyatt 1997). However, these "controlling images," as argued by Collins (2000), not only promote notions of African-American

women's sexual deviance, but also provide a "sexual script" that shape the sexual development, behavior, and attitudes of African-American women (Brown, White-Johnson and Griffin-Fennell 2013; Stephen and Phillips 2003). In order to challenge these stereotypes, the "politics of respectability," or conforming to "bourgeois, white, patriarchal, and heteronormative ideals" of sexuality, have figured prominently in Black women's lives (Chepp 2015: 208). That is, some Black women alter their sexual behavior to embody sexual conservatism in order to combat the stereotypical notion of women's sexual deviance (Hammonds 2002). But in so doing, it fosters silence of their sexual agency, desires, and pleasures (Hammonds 2002; Morgan 2016).

The stereotypes of Black women's sexuality are also intimately tied to their historical and contemporary experiences of sexual violence (Collins 2005; Hill 2005; McGuffey 2013). While Black feminist scholars have been attuned to how intersecting forms of oppression impact women's sexual lives, they contend the dominant construction of racial oppression casts Black men as the "true" victims that obscures women's oppression within intimate relationships at the hands of their male partners (Hill 2005). Black men, unable to achieve hegemonic masculinity due to economic and racial discrimination (Majors and Billson 1993), potentially engage in "compensatory" forms of masculinity such as sexual violence against partners in order to assert power and authority in intimate relationships (Pyke 1996). Black women may harbor fears that authorities will doubt their report or that reporting the abuse will provoke anger from the larger African-American community (Hill 2005: 187). As a consequence, some African-American women endure this sexual mistreatment and abuse from their male partners in

order to "[preserve] racial unity" and not reinforce stereotypes of "pathological" African-American relationships (Hill 2005: 194). Therefore, sexual violence figures prominently in how "women experience their bodies, their sexualities, and their relationships to other, particularly men" (Fahs 2011: 222). Women's sexual narratives may reflect sexual aggression and/or violence and the social control of their sexuality.

However, a burgeoning cadre of Black feminist scholars contests the monolithic cultural discourse of African-American women's sexual oppression and exploitation that removes space for resistance to the discourse (Chepp 2015; Lee 2010; Nash 2014; Young 2014). These scholars provide a more nuanced understanding of African-American women's cultural representations and challenge notions that African-American women are wholly passive in the construction of their sexuality (Lee 2010). In fact, Lee (2010: 127) argues that the prevailing literature on representations of African-American women "[approaches] sexuality from a defensive vantage point" that treats women as "cultural dupes." Furthermore, the "politics of respectability" not only influence African-American women's sexual behavior, but also shape the literature in terms of sanitizing research on their sexual agency and pleasure (Chepp 2015; Lee 2010: Morgan 2016). Diametrically opposed to the discourse of "respectability" is "irreverence" (i.e., lack of respectability) that provides an alternative discourse of African-American women's sexuality as explicit, vulgar, and "raunchy" (found prominently in rap music) (Chepp 2015: 208). However, this binary framework of respectability/irreverence reinforces narrow understandings of Black women's sexuality. Instead, these scholars suggest to examine a "third space" that subverts the limiting binary found in some scholarship to reveal the potential for

women's sexual agency and to capture the complexity of Black women's sexuality (Chepp 2015).

Some empirical research on African-American women's sexuality has focused on the number of sexual partners, risky sexual behaviors, or undesirable outcomes of sexuality, such as teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease from a biomedical perspective (Hill 2009). These lines of research focus on risk behaviors and undesirable sexual outcomes, thus reinforcing the negative stereotypes of African American women's sexuality and the notion of sexual irresponsibility (Hill 2005; Ray 2018). They also provide a limited and narrow understanding of African American women's sexuality, frequently examining the women only in the "context of social problems" (Hicks and Handler 1978, as cited in Gabriel 2002) as well as medicalizing Black women's bodies (Goparaju and Warren-Jeanpierre 2012; Strings 2015).

Other empirical research has contributed to a wider understanding African-American women's sexuality – for example, studies exploring the role of peer networks in sexual behavior (Harper, Timmons, Motley, Tyler, Catania, Boyer, and Dolcini 2012), parental sexual socialization (Barnes and Bynum 2010; Rouse 2002), sexual behaviors on college campuses (Gabriel 2002; Hughes 2014; McClintock 2010), representations in pornography (Nash 2014; Young 2014), and sexual health throughout women's life span (Mincey and Norris 2014). These lines of research show that the controlling images of African-American's sexuality shape African-American women's sexual behavior by providing a standard (Stephen and Philips 2003). For example, McClintock (2010) documented Black college women's underrepresentation in casual, uncommitted sexual

encounters outside a monogamous romantic relationship – also knowns as "hook ups" – relative to their white and Asian-American college peers, due to Black women's wish to avoid fulfilling negative stereotypes. Gabriel (2002) found that college-aged African-American women demonstrated a strong ability to refuse unwanted sexual activity so as to prevent the negative sexual outcomes (e.g., sexually transmitted disease or unwanted pregnancy) that society so frequently equates with African-American women. These findings suggest that African-American women are culturally conscious of the negative stereotypes (Brown et al. 2013; Stephen and Philips 2003) and alter their sexual behavior to avoid realization of them. Negative stereotypes of African-American women also shape men's romantic preferences. Research on interracial unions documents the salience of these stereotypes of African-American women as unfeminine (e.g., the "angry Black woman") or promiscuous (e.g, the "video ho"), driving their low rates of out-marriage (Childs 2005; Joyner and Kao 2005; Robnett and Feliciano 2011; Yancey 2009). These studies illustrate how African-Americans women make choices about whether and with whom they have sex, but they do not describe the women's subjective experiences when they do have sex or in other words, "how sexuality is lived" (Dickerson and Rousseau 2009: 323).

Relatively absent in the existing literature is the embodiment of African-American women's sexuality – that is, how African-American women experience and describe their bodies during sex as well as their expectations of sex. This dearth in scholarship represents a "structured silence" and reflects the "politics of respectability" that limits alternative discourses of sexuality from the normative negative stereotypes (Hammonds

1999: 100). While the majority of studies on African-American women's sexuality tends to focus on sexual attitudes (with results supporting the dominant trope: Blacks generally hold more sexually permissive views), relatively little is known about African-American women's embodied experience and the perceived quality of their sexual experiences. One study found that Black women reported a lack of sexual interest and low sexual satisfaction relative to White women, Black men, and White men (Gonzales and Roslin 2005). It may be that African-American women's relative lack of sexual enjoyment reflects their position in the social hierarchy, as they have less freedom to engage in sexual pleasure without sanctions from society (e.g., harboring social anxiety of perpetuating promiscuous stereotypes). However, this study's authors did not investigate the women's qualitative reasons for their dissatisfaction.

This study explores the following. In this first empirical chapter, I examine how heterosexual African-American women subjectively experience sex and their conceptualization of sexual pleasure. What characterizes their positive sexual experiences and what characterizes their negative sexual experiences? In the second empirical chapter, I examine whether and how "controlling images" shape Black women's racialized sexual selves. In so doing, the study identifies ways in which women cope with stigma associated with Black women's sexual deviancy. In the last empirical chapter, I center Black women's perceptions of their body and how their body image relates to their sexuality, or *sexual body image*. This chapter interrogates how dominant expectations of Black women's bodies shape their sexual encounters. That is, it isolates "the fleshy body" (Plummer 2003: 526) in sexuality by examining how women describe their bodies during

sex, including their partner's messages about their bodies. Overall, examining women's embodied experiences can provide a greater understanding of how to support African-American women's sexual lives and well-being (Gabriel 2002; Hill 2009; Stephen and Phillips 2003).

A limitation of prior work on women's sexuality is that it tends to assume heterosexuality without exploring women's sexual preferences or explicitly citing heterosexuality as a focus (Collins 2005; Greene 2002; Hammonds 2002). This study explicitly focuses on women who self-identify as heterosexual, and as such, its findings cannot be interpreted as applicable to Black women who identify as other than heterosexual. I included this restriction for theoretical reasons, as gendered inequalities between men and women shape heterosexual sexual encounters (Fahs 2014). To maximize contribution to the literature and facilitate comparisons with prior work, which have predominantly focused on privileged, heterosexual white women, it examines heterosexual African-American women. Future research should de-center heteronormativity to examine queer and lesbian Black women's embodied sexual experiences and stigma management (Ferguson 2004; Hammonds 2004; Lorde 1984; Moore 2011).

In summary, to address limitations of prior work and the need for knowledge about Black women's sexuality, this dissertation examines how heterosexual African-American women subjectively experience sex, their conceptualization of sexual pleasure, and responses to dominant expectations of Black women's sexuality and their coping strategies (Questions 1 and 2).

## African-American Women's Body Image

This section reviews prior research on heterosexual African-American women's body image in relation to their sexual experiences and examines the ways in which Black women have developed a cultural body ideal to challenge the dominant body ideal.

### *Body Image Dimensions*

Body image refers to how a person perceives his or her body in terms of its physical appearance (including body shape or size, weight, skin color, and other phenotypic characteristics, (Cash and Pruzinsky 2002), ability (i.e., strength and skill) (Inahara 2007; Taub, Fanflik, and McLorg 2003), and health (Rauchsher, Kauer, and Wilson 2010). Positive body image (or body satisfaction) occurs when a person's perception of his/her body is congruent with his/her desired physical appearance, ability, and/or health. While body image is considered a multi-faceted construct, the literature tends to regard body image as only encompassing physical appearance, neglecting to address physical ability and health. An exception is within the disability literature. For example, women with physical disabilities are aware of the dominant ideal of the able body. Because their bodies do not meet this ideal, they are more likely to have a negative body image and feelings of worthlessness (Taub et al. 2003). Therefore, conceptualizations of body image should incorporate an ability dimension to gain a broader understanding of body image. The physical ability dimension of body image is particularly salient to understand behavioral aspects of sexuality because of the physicality of sex (Hanna 2010).

In addition, perceived health, as a dimension of body image, has not been fully examined in the literature. It too is salient to the understanding of sexuality since sex both promotes health (Jannini, Fisher, Blitzer, and McMahon 2009; Tolman 2006) and may be constrained by it (Beasley 2008). Historically, the focus on health as a dimension of body image has been restricted to research on ill people, such as people with cancer (Horden and Street 2007) or disability (Tepper 2000). However, there is a need to understand health as a dimension of body image in the population more broadly for several reasons. First, we are in an era of chronic diseases; broad portions of the population have health conditions that affect their daily living but, if managed, do not immediately threaten their lives (Ogden, Lamb, Carroll, and Flegal 2015). African-Americans are disproportionately affected by these conditions (Armstrong 2013; Bennett, Wolin, Goodman, Samplin-Salgado, Carter, Dutton, Hill, and Emmons 2006; Sebastião, Chodzko-Zajko, and Schwingel 2015). Second, the ideology of healthism has emerged, making it such that it is no longer sufficient for members of society to look good (i.e., have good physical appearance) and be fit (i.e., strong and able); they must also be well (i.e., healthy, free of disease). Healthism equates health to morality and assigns the responsibility for maintaining health to individual people (Crawford 1980; Dworkin and Wachs 2009; Edgley 2006; Saguy and Gruys 2010). From this perspective, people who perceive themselves to have healthy bodies can, thus, feel good about themselves more generally. Third, while other research has documented that people perceive some bodies to be more healthy than others – for example, overweight or obese bodies are perceived to be unhealthy (Gailey 2014; Saguy 2011; Saguy and Gruys 2010), how these perceptions

affect a person's own perception of the health of his/her body is relatively unexplored, especially among African American women.

I consider the three dimensions of heterosexual African-American women's body image -- physical appearance, physical ability, and health – as they relate to sexual experience. Including all three dimensions will permit analysis of cases in which women experience negative body image along multiple dimensions. Prior research indicates that body image in these cases is more negative (Koch, Mansfield, Thurau, and Carey 2005). It will permit analysis of cases in which women's body image varies by dimension: for example, a woman who views herself as beautiful in appearance but ill (or unhealthy) in body. The relation of body image to sexuality may vary by dimension.

### *The Dominant Body Ideal*

The current ideal body in the global West is white, thin, taut, contained, healthy, young and able. However, this ideal is based on the values of white, Euro-centric, middle-class, and heterosexual communities (Bartky 2002; Gailey 2014; Saguy 2011; Satinsky et al. 2013). However, this ideal is elusive for the majority of women (Bartky 2002; Clarke 2002; Duncan 1994), and by definition, African-American women cannot meet this ideal due to their blackness (Lovejoy 2001; Patton 2006). Society possesses a social aversion to the characteristics that deviate from this ideal, as they are deemed unattractive or undesirable, particularly for women (Gailey 2014). Therefore, all women are encouraged to strive to meet this ideal. Regimes of dieting, exercise, comportment, adornment, and medical body modification procedures are held as avenues leading toward the ideal (Bartky 1997; 2002; Birke 2000; Bordo 1993; Conboy, Medina and

Stanbury 1997). This study will examine the extent to which heterosexual African-American women subscribe to the dominant ideal.

Research indicates that several social institutions, such as the media (Harper and Tiggeman 2008), parents (Haworth-Hoeppner 2000), peers (Dohnt and Tiggmann 2006), health institutions such as the Center for Diseases and Control Prevention (CDC 2014a; Monaghan, Hollands, and Pritchard 2010), and even social scientists (Gailey 2014), convey messages that shape an individual's sense of gendered self and body image (Crawley et al. 2008). The media, in particular, exposes women to unrealistic images of female bodies that inform how women should evaluate their bodies (Thompson, Heinberg, and Tantleff-Dunn 1999, as cited in DeBraganza and Hasuenblas 2010). These social institutions communicate that the dominant ideal is what constitutes beauty and attractiveness, thereby negatively affecting women's body image. Many women have poor body image, due to the unattainable ideal that deems most women's bodies to be deficient (Bartky 1997). Women's generally negative attitudes toward their body constitute a "normative discontent" (Rodin, Silberstein, and Streigel-Moore 1984, as cited in Hawarth-Hoeppner 2000). This pattern suggests that social expectations about the body function to exclude rather than to include women. I explore the extent to which heterosexual African-American women receive messages from these various sources about their body and how they respond to these messages.

### *Significance of Body Image*

Body image matters as it is associated with significant social outcomes. In Western society, gendered messages promote women's physical appearance as inextricably tied to their self-worth, fostering women's constant surveillance and management of their body (Bordo 1993). Women who fail to meet the ideal face a host of social sanctions, such as having a lower likelihood of marriage (Sobal, Rauschenbach, and Frongillo 2009), less access to healthcare (Amy, Aalborg, Lyons, and Keranen 2006), and greater risk of discrimination in employment (Fikkan and Rothblum 2011). Many women are preoccupied with meeting this ideal so as to avoid social stigma and discrimination (Bordo 1993). Dominant cultural standards, thus, place enormous value on women's appearance and conformity to the ideal body. While men also experience pressure to conform to a masculine body ideal – in particular, a muscular body (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), they face fewer consequences than women when they fail to realize the ideal (Duncan 1994). While we know that body image is a component of sexuality as bodies internalize social norms that affect sexual experiences (Fahs 2011; Gailey 2012; Satinksy et al. 2013), little research has explored the relation of body image to heterosexual African-American women's sexuality. This study is concerned with the relation of body image to heterosexual African-American women's expectations of sex, include their perceived ability to attract sexual partners, and their subjective experiences during sex (that is, how their sexual body image shapes their sexual encounters).

*African-American Women's Body Image and the Cultural Body Ideal*

To the extent that African-American women's body image has been studied, the research shows that Black women report relatively high rates of body satisfaction (Cash and Henry 1995; Cox, Zunker, Wingo, Thomas, and Ard 2010; DeBranganza and Hausenblas 2010; Frisby 2004; Lovejoy 2001). For example, Frisby (2004) found that after being exposed to advertisements of thin, physically attractive white women, African-American women reported no significant change in body image. The findings suggest that African-American women are more likely to compare themselves to women with similar characteristics or traits – that is, not to the dominant group (i.e., white women) – and have greater latitude to inhabit larger bodies. Also, Black women are less likely to evaluate their body in terms of weight (Bennett et al. 2006). In contrast, white women, relative to African-American women, reported higher levels of body dissatisfaction after exposure to media images of thin, white women (DeBraganza and Hausenblas 2010). However, these prior studies treat the dominant ideal as if it were universal across all racial groups, rather than acknowledging its inherent bias toward more socially powerful groups (Lovejoy 2001; Poran 2002).

Some scholars acknowledge the possibility of alternative ideals, and in so doing, provide a possible explanation for the pattern of African-American women's consistently more positive body image. They suggest that Black women may resist the dominant ideal and instead, subscribe to an alternative, more attainable (i.e., less rigid or fixed) body ideal that aligns with the cultural construction of Black femininity (Collins 2005; Lovejoy 2001). For example, the emergence of the "Black is beautiful" movement in the late

1960's constituted a cultural resistance to dominant (read: white) standards of beauty through the valorization of darker skin, bigger bodies, and African facial features (Craig 2002; Lau 2011). While, in its inception, this movement was not tied to a political organization or movement, African-American women's self-love and appreciation of their appearance, a form of racial pride, constituted a political act in a society that perpetually devalued their appearance (Craig 2002; Nash 2011). It countered the societal valuation of the dominant ideal as the standard of beauty for all women and modified the ideal to emphasize self-expression and confidence, as opposed to physical appearance, to develop positive body image. The broader African-American community supported this cultural ideal for its women (Collins 2005), and African-American women's body image improved as a result (Craig 2002; Lovejoy 2001). This cultural ideal, thus, facilitates positive body image for African-American women and can explain their body satisfaction.

Together, these findings have generated a general understanding among scholars that African-American women, relative to white women, possess a more positive body image and an allegiance to an alternative body ideal. Some scholars, however, challenge this understanding, calling it oversimplified and uncritical (Bennett et al. 2006; Patel and Gary 2001). They argue that while Black women have developed a cultural ideal to counteract the stigmatizing dominant ideal, we don't yet know whether African-American women subscribe to the cultural body ideal only, the dominant ideal only, or some configuration of both. For example, with the growth of the African-American middle class, some research shows that middle- to upper-class African-American women

may succumb to components of the dominant ideal, such as thinness (Harris 2006). This suggests that societal messages shape some African-American women's conformity (or assimilation) to the dominant ideal as a strategy for upward mobility (Patton 2002).

Although some Black women may challenge the dominant body ideal, research indicates that colorism, or skin tone stratification, remains pervasive in the African-American community that privileges lighter skin tone (Collins 2005; Hills 2009; Hochschild and Weaver 2007; Hunter 2002; Thompson and Keith 2001). Lighter-skinned African-Americans are perceived as more attractive, intelligent, and moral (as they more closely resemble whites), which concomitantly casts their darker-skinned counterparts as ugly, uneducated, immoral, and ultimately inferior (Hunter 2002; Thompson and Keith 2001). Colorism, however, appears to disproportionately affect African-American women compared to their male counterparts in terms of certain social outcomes (Collins 2005; Hill 2009; Hunter 2002; Thompson and Keith 2001). A host of literature has examined the association of skin tone to significant life outcomes such as educational attainment, income, and marital status, revealing how skin tone serves as "social capital" for Black women (Hunter 2002). Therefore, African-American women may reject certain facets of the dominant body ideal (i.e., thinness), but engage in cosmetic techniques to achieve lighter skin color to receive social advantages offered to lighter-skinned women (Collins 2005).

While colorism has been well documented within the Black community (Keith and Herring 1991), the prior research treats skin tone as unrelated from other body image dimensions. For example, some studies solely examine African-American women's skin

tone (Hunter 2002; Thompson and Keith 2001) whereas others only focus on women's body shape and/or weight (Antin and Hunt 2013; Beaubeouf-Lafontant 2003; Lovejoy 2001; Poran 2002). Fewer studies examine African-American women's perceived physical ability or health status. This renders African-American women's bodies as "dismembered parts" that reinforces their objectification in the literature (Nurse 2013, 2). Therefore, the dominant literature on African-American women's body image remains conceptually disjointed and presents a narrow understanding of their body image (Nurse 2013). My study rectifies this conceptual limitation by examining several dimensions of body image (i.e., physical appearance, including skin tone and body shape; health; physical ability) to provide a broader conceptualization of their body image. The study examines whether and how African-American women navigate the dominant and cultural ideals and unpack how body satisfaction and dissatisfaction can occur simultaneously across various body image dimensions (Antin and Hunt 2013).

While Black women's greater satisfaction with their body compared to white women, at least in some respects, may indicate less preoccupation with dominant ideal (Lau 2011) and/or allegiance to the cultural ideal, several Black feminist scholars call for a more critical and culturally sensitive examination of African-American women's positive body image as potentially masking physical health problems and, therefore, oppression (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2003; Harris 2006; Hill 2009; Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003; Lau 2011; Lovejoy 2001). That is, the cultural body ideal, although appearing as resistance to thinness, might not benefit African-American women and can potentially have serious unintended health implications, such as normalizing health

problems that are associated with weight, such as heart disease, diabetes, and hypertension (Hill 2009; Lau 2011). Thus, African-American women's reported greater satisfaction with, even celebration of, their body is potentially a "double-edge sword" that contributes to health vulnerabilities, such as compulsive eating to cope with systemic racialized gender discrimination (Harris 2006; Hill 2009; Lau 2011; Lovejoy 2001). The stereotypical notion that African-American women do not suffer from negative body image must be understood within the context of a white supremacist, patriarchal society that continues to cast their bodies as either deviating from or resisting the dominant white ideal, but never embodying it (Collins 2005; Craig 2002; Lau 2011; Patton 2006). Additionally, the pervasive healthist ideology celebrates the "healthy" body and marginalizes bodies that do not appear healthy (e.g., overweight or unfit bodies), particularly stigmatizing African-American women's bodies (Kwate and Threadcraft 2015; Strings 2015).

Therefore, Black women's body image is more complex than much of the literature suggests, as these women face a host of social oppressions that physically shape their body and inform how they perceive their body. Their body image must be understood in the context of larger society's perpetual criticism of their "deviant" and "unhealthy" bodies. Moreover, prevailing stereotypes continue to influence even the sociological research on African-American women and their body. For instance, the "strong Black woman" stereotype casts African-American women as resilient either naturally or due to history (i.e., survival of slavery) (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2003; Collins 2005; Harris 2006; Hill 2009). It valorizes heavy African American women's bodies for

their strength and signals resistance to racism and gender discrimination. Much of the research documenting this stereotype, however, reinforces the dominant assumption that African-American women are invulnerable to discrimination (Hill 2009; Lau 2011) and overlooks the social problems shaping women's experiences (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2003). Furthermore, this line of research can unwittingly reinforce negative stereotypes of African-American women as prone to overindulgence and physical inactivity (Kwate and Threadcraft 2015; Saguy and Gruys 2010) as well as perpetuate pressure for African-American women to be satisfied with their bodies (Antin and Hunt 2013). The proposed study aims to avoid these pitfalls in the extant literature by examining how African-American women descriptions of their body reflect broader social inequalities and by viewing their narratives as "attempts to speak oppressive realities through their bodies" (Beaubeouf-Lafontant 2003: 119).

### *The Link between Women's Body Image and Sexuality*

Only recently have scholars examined women's body image's connection to sexuality. Further research is needed to obtain a holistic understanding of women's sexuality (Wiederman and Hurst 1998: 272). Body image is more salient to women than men, as society places greater value on women's physical appearance, especially in terms of dating and courtship (Bartky 2002; Bordo 1993). Women with heavier bodies experience weight-based stigma and are less likely to marry than their thin counterparts (Fikkan and Rothblum 2011; Gailey 2014; Sobal, Rauschenbach, and Frongillo 2009). Thus, women's physical appearance shapes their sexual selves and experiences (McClintock 2011; Woertman and van den Brink 2012).

Research to date on the link between women's body image and sexuality has yielded several dominant findings. Scholars largely agree that women's positive evaluation of their bodies is associated with positive sexual experiences, including greater sexual satisfaction and pleasure (Koch et al. 2005; Satinsky, Reece, Dennis, Sanders, and Bardzell 2012; Satinsky et al. 2013; Segal 1994), greater sexual initiation (Woertman and van den Brink 2012), greater sexual exploration of their sexuality (Weinberg and Williams 2010), confidence as a sexual partner (Meana and Nunnink 2006; Wiederman 2000), and increased feelings of sexual desirability (McClintock 2011). Similarly, negative body image has adverse effects on women's sexual experiences. Women who report discontent with their bodies avoid sex in relationships (Koch et al. 2005; Wiederman 2000; Wiederman and Hurst 1998), engage in risky sexual practices (Gillen, Lefkowitz and Shearer 2006, as cited in Satinsky et al. 2013; La Rocque and Cioe 2010), have less frequent sexual activity (Woertman and van den Brink 2012), experience less sexual satisfaction or pleasure (Meana and Nunnink 2006), engage in unwanted or regrettable sexual encounters (Satinsky et al. 2013), and limit certain sexual practices due to bodily self-consciousness (Weinberg and Williams 2010). This literature has focused heavily on women's negative body image and negative sexual experiences, especially as measured objectively. Far less research has examined women's positive body image and positive sexual experiences (Fahs 2011; Satinsky et al. 2012). This study examines both positive and negative sexual experiences, thus avoiding pathologizing heterosexual Black women's sexuality. It also focuses on women's subjective experiences of sex as opposed to quantitative measures.

While the aforementioned scholarship indicates an association between women's body image and sexuality, it is not yet clear whether it depends on the woman's perception of herself, her perceptions of other people's perceptions of her body, or both. Wiederman and Hurst (1998), for example, argue that women's perceptions of their own bodies may be less salient than other people's (i.e., romantic/sexual partner's) evaluation of their bodies in determining women's body image and sexual experience. In other words, a woman may positively perceive her body but experience poor sexual outcomes because she believes her partner negatively views her body. In contrast, other scholars have found that women's self-evaluations are more salient than external evaluations (Satinsky et al. 2012; Satinsky et al. 2013). The proposed study aims to address this uncertainty by examining both heterosexual African-American women's perceptions of their body and other peoples' – especially their sexual partner's – perceptions of their body as factors that differentiate between positive and negative sexual experiences.

Embodiment scholars attribute the relationship between women's body image and negative sexual experiences to a "disembodied sexuality" in which women are cognitively detached and alienated from their bodies during sexual encounters due to the preoccupation of appearing fat, ugly, or otherwise undesirable (Holland et al. 1994; La Rocque and Cioe 2010; Meana and Nunnink 2006; Weinberg and Williams 2010). This bodily self-surveillance (in the Foucauldian sense) interferes with their sexual satisfaction, preventing women from enjoying physical sensations (Holland et al. 1994; La Rocque and Cioe 2010; Meana and Nunnink 2006; Satinsky et al. 2013; Tolman 1994). Disembodied sexuality works in concert with the "looking glass body," which

refers to the imagined appraisals of one's body from other people (Waskul and Vannini 2006; Weinberg and Williams 2010). Women may internalize the gaze of their sexual partner and experience discomfort with their bodies, making it difficult for them to not only be satisfied with their bodies but also enjoy sex. Prior qualitative studies, although few in number, have examined women's accounts of their sexual interactions. They documented the presence of a disembodied sexuality in which women frame their bodies as passive instruments in sexual encounters and view sex as something "done" to them (Holland et al. 1994; Segal 1994). They also found that that women reported pleasurable sexual experiences when they felt physically "embodied" during the sexual experience, such as focusing on the sexual encounter and their body's capabilities (Fahs 2011). Therefore, being fully present in the sexual encounter, as opposed to focusing on (negative) body image, contributes to more sexually satisfying experiences for women and can generate more positive relationships with women and their bodies. Note that this research did not distinguish between dimensions of body image, but it suggests that focusing on physical ability instead of appearance during a sexual encounter may lead to different sexual experiences. The dissertation explores what heterosexual African-American women focus on during their sexual encounters.

Embodiment scholars argue that the relationship between body image and sexuality not only reveals women's difficulty in attaining bodily and sexual satisfaction (as society dictates an unrealistic appearance ideal and prioritizes men's pleasure), but also indicates how habitual self-monitoring is linked to structured gender inequality (Weinberg and Williams 2010: 63). Gendered inequalities are present when women "lose

control" of the sexual interaction, due to the constant preoccupation with their bodily appearance, disassociate from their own bodies, and put themselves at heightened risk for unwanted sexual interactions or sexual coercion (Holland et al. 1994: 29). Women's disembodied sexuality reinforces men's exercise of power and control in a "subtle" process where women are constrained in expressing their embodied sexual feelings and challenging men's dominant masculinity (Holland et al. 1994). Thus, bodies united in sexual interactions are positioned vis-à-vis power, rendering women as "spectators" to rather than agentic participants in their sexual interactions (Meana and Nunnink 2006; Tolman 2006; Tolman et al. 2014). While this prior research documents how the gender structure operates to influence women's sexual pleasure, it has not documented how racial or other social structures operate to include women's sexual pleasure. I address this gap by examining the intersection of gender, race, and class in the relation of heterosexual African-American women's body image to sexual experience.

Several other limitations in the existing literature on the link between women's body image and sexuality are present. First, consistency in the measurement of body image is lacking; prior measures have included body image scales (Koch et al. 2005), experimenters' "objective" evaluations of participants' physical attractiveness (Wiederman and Hurst 1998), and body mass index (BMI) (Satinsky et al. 2012; Sobal et al. 2009; Wiederman and Hurst 1998). Missing from the literature are women's subjective feelings and perceptions about their body (i.e., qualitative accounts of how women describe their bodies), especially across the three dimensions of physical appearance, physical ability, and health. Also missing are studies that examine how these

qualitative accounts of body image relate to women's subjective sexual experience (for an exception see Holland et al. 1994 and Satinsky et al. 2013). The proposed study aims to fill these gaps.

Second, much research on the body image-sexuality link does not distinguish between women's general body image (i.e., how women evaluate their bodies on an everyday basis - the "public" body) and their contextual body image (i.e., how women evaluate their bodies during sexual interactions - the "private" body or sexual body image) (Cahill 2006; Montemurro and Gillen 2013). How women perceive their bodies in public may differ from how they perceive their bodies in private, as nudity and physical contact with a partner potentially heightens self-consciousness and vulnerability (Cahill 2006; Shildrick 2005; Weinberg and Williams 2010; Yamamiya, Cash, and Thompson 2006). It is well-documented that women are objectified and held to the dominant ideal to a greater degree relative to men, where women's self-objectification can undermine sexual satisfaction. While women across sexual orientations are subjected to the dominant ideal (which is predicated on heteronormative standards of beauty), lesbian women may have greater latitude in rejecting the dominant ideal and adopting alternative ideals, or may place less value on physical appearance (Morrison, Morrison, and Sager 2004). For example, some research indicates that heterosexual women, relative to lesbian women, report slightly greater concern over exposing their body in the presence of their sexual partner (Woertman and van den Brink 2012). Heterosexual women may feel more pressure to conform to the dominant ideal because, as heterosexuals, they are closer to it than women of queer sexualities. As a result, they may feel self-conscious when they do

not meet the ideal, particularly in the presence of their male sexual partner. I address the need for research distinguishing women's general body image from their contextual body image (in this case, their sexual body image) by focusing on heterosexual Black women's body image during a sexual encounter and more generally.

A third limitation is that many studies of body image and sexuality rely on a narrow sample – specifically, college-aged, middle- or upper-class white women who are more likely to meet at least portions of the dominant body ideal (Satinsky et al. 2013; Wiederman 2000; Woertman and van den Brink 2012). Findings from these studies present a restricted body range and provide a limited understanding of heterosexual African-American women's experience. Racial/ethnic minority women, relative to white women (who are often treated as the reference group), and women who inhabit "non-normative" bodies (Satinsky et al. 2013), are largely underrepresented in this literature. We know less about how Black women's body image shapes their sexuality, and we have reason to believe that their patterns are different from white women's patterns, as issues of body image and sexuality are amplified for women of color since they face the intersection of race, gender, and class discrimination in society (Collins 2005). The absence of African-American women in the literature equates to cultural invisibility (JanHohamed 1992) and another form of social control that excludes African-American women's sexual accounts from the literature on sexuality. The study aims to reduce this invisibility by focusing on heterosexual African-American women's sexual accounts.

# CHAPTER 3

## Research Design and Method

### Design

The study involved qualitative, semi-structured interviews that took place in-person, which are best designed to understand individual's subjective experiences, particularly when little is known about a phenomenon in a population (Langer 1989; Sprague and Zimmerman 2004; Stanfield 2011). This enhanced the goal of eliciting rich, in-depth descriptions of Black women's construction of their sexual experiences and body image. Additionally, semi-structured interviews allow for flexibility so that participants can provide insight unanticipated by the researcher. This was instrumental in identifying new themes and negative cases. I utilized interviews to best understand how participants described their bodies and embodied sexual experiences, as opposed to their identity, and not to reach an "objective" reality. Rather, I was interested in how women constructed their own social world. Therefore, this method also allowed for probing to uncover meanings and assumptions. My methodological approach is largely informed by feminist scholars who are concerned with inequities inherent in the interview process and attuned to minimizing power imbalances (Carpenter 2005; DeVault 1990). As a biracial, European- and Asian-American woman, I brought a critical race feminist perspective to this study as an "outsider" to the group under study (Tinker and Armstrong 2008).

### Sample

The sample consisted of 31 African-American women. I reached saturation - that is, recruitment ceased when no new themes appear in the data (Miles and Huberman

1994). When interviews began to elicit less rich data, I took a break from data collection to allow for the possibility that the lack of richness is associated with my research fatigue rather than saturation. After a break, I resumed data collection and cease when no new themes emerge. I was attuned to negative cases and pursued them by sampling in such a way as to permit deeper analysis of them, as appropriate. To be eligible for this study, participants must self-identify as a heterosexual African-American woman, be 18 years of age or older, have been sexually active with a partner(s) in the last six months prior to the interview, and have engaged in physical activity in the six months prior to the interview.

Participants' ages range from 18 – 71, with an average of 29 years old. Given that women's body size and shape span the spectrum, this provided diversity in sample to incorporate a range of experiences with regards to their body. The majority of the sample had a post-secondary degree or enrolled in college, which reflects a fairly privileged background. Therefore, the sample was highly educated compared to the national population. While this might not reflect the general population, that the sample was fairly homogenous in terms of educational status allowed me to focus my analysis on other salient factors such as body size. Additionally, more than half of the sample were currently in a relationship or married (n = 19) and several women (n = 12) reported they were single.

Given the plan to recruit participants via fitness venues (described below), the sample was limited to physically active women who meet the physical activity guidelines recommended by the CDC. The CDC (2008) defines physical activity as "any bodily movement produced by the contraction of skeletal muscle that increases energy

expenditure above a basal level" – that is, beyond the level required for activities of daily living. It includes sports or exercise activities (e.g., brisk walking, running, dance class). The CDC recommends that adults (ages 18-64) engage in "2 hours and 30 minutes (150 minutes) a week of moderate-intensity aerobic activity, 1 hour and 15 minutes (75 minutes) a week of vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity, or an equivalent combination" (CDC 2008). It also recommends muscle-strengthening activities that are moderate or high intensity and involve all major muscle groups on two or more days a week (CDC 2008). In order to be considered "physically active" for this study, women must have engaged in either of the following at some point during the past six months: 1) 2 hours and 30 minutes (150 minutes) a week of moderate-intensity activity or 1 hour and 15 (75 minutes) minutes a week of vigorous-intensity, or an equivalent combination or 2) muscle-strengthening activities two or more days a week. While prior research utilizes the past three months as a common time frame to determine current participation in physical activity (Greenleaf 2005; Stofan, DiPietro, Davis, Kohl, and Blair 1998), I will broaden the time frame to six months to be more inclusive, given the low levels of physical activity in the United States (CDC 2014b).

Limiting the sample to physically active women who meet the criteria is advantageous methodologically as it reduced variation in the sample. It eliminated the need to compare physically active women to physically inactive women and permitted instead a focus on differences in subjective sexual experience based on the three dimensions of body image. Holding constant participation in physical activity made the number of comparisons feasible. Prior research has found that being physically active is

associated with more positive sexual experience (Deem and Gilroy 1998; Penhollow and Young 2004; Weaver and Byers 2006). However, I anticipated that even a physically active group of heterosexual African-American women will be diverse in terms of reported body image, given that prior research has associated physical activity with negative body image in some instances (Duncan 1994; MacNevin 2003; Wray 2007) and positive body image in other instances (Impett, Daubenmier, and Hirschman 2006; Tiggeman, Coutts, and Clark 2014). Another advantage to focusing on physically active women is that they are identifiable through their attendance at fitness venues. These venues served as sites for recruitment. Future research can build on this study by investigating samples that include African-American women who do not participate in physical activity (Ray 2014).

While solo sex (i.e., masturbation) is an embodied sexual experience, this project aims to examine how women evaluate their bodies in the presence of a sexual partner and their embodied sexual experiences with said partner. Second, the sample was restricted to women who have been sexually active with a partner(s), and to facilitate recall, it was restricted to women who have been sexually active recently within the past six months. The sample was also restricted to heterosexual women for theoretical reasons as gendered relations of inequality shape heterosexual sexual encounters that privilege men's sexual satisfaction. In order to maximize contribution to the literature, I examined heterosexual Black women and rectified a limitation of previous research that tends to focus on privileged, heterosexual white women's sexuality and its relationship to body image (Satinksy et al. 2013). Therefore, these criteria limit the generalizability of the study

results. Future research should investigate queer or non-heterosexually identifying Black women to unpack how body image influences their sexuality.

## Recruitment

Due to my prior research (Nieri and Hughes 2015), I had access to several exercise facilities that serve Black women. I started recruitment at these sites and then conducted additional recruitment through my personal network and referrals from study participants. I recruited from Z-Studio, a franchised commercial Zumba studio that serves predominantly women of color in Orange County and Healthy Heritage, a non-profit health organization that serves Black women in the Inland Empire. Given that recruiting from fitness venues yielded lower than anticipated participants, I adjusted my strategy to rely on referrals from study participants or snowball sampling to recruit additional participants (given that they meet the criteria for participation in the study). I successfully recruited a sample that includes women of diverse body sizes/shapes.

Recruitment began in April 2016 and completed in August 2018. I announced the study in group fitness classes either before or after the class. At that time, I also distributed a recruitment flyer that will include my contact information (name, e-mail and phone number) (see Appendix A). I gathered contact information from interested women immediately, as well as left at the venue a sign-up sheet for women who decide later that they wish to participate. To maximize recruitment, I visited group fitness classes on different days and times to ensure I reached as many potential participants. Additionally, I posted flyers on the bulletin board (where available) at each site and/or left flyers at the front desk and scheduled interviews with the eligible women who contacted me.

After completion of the interview with a participant, I asked her whether she wished to refer to me anyone eligible for the study. Then, I invited the referred potential participants by sending them a recruitment email (which will contain the same info as the recruitment flyer) or, if no email was available, called them by phone, using the flyer as a script. Furthermore, I invited all participants to "member check" at a later time, which involved cross-checking the interpretation of preliminary findings (see below for more detail on "member-checking"). I wrote a two-page summary of the results and preliminary themes that emerged from the data. Three participants engaged in "member-checking" that took place over the phone and lasted one hour. Prior to our phone call, I sent the two-page summary over e-mail so that participants could review my findings and provide any additional feedback. During the "member-checking," I wrote down notes of our conversation which often expanded on pertinent themes. I incorporated notes from the "member-check" into Atlas.ti to analyze along with the data.

I scheduled interviews within three weeks of recruitment of the participant, if not sooner. I sent a reminder e-mail/call prior to the interview the day before to confirm the interview date, time, and location. Women who participated received a $25 gift card as well as the psychological reward associated with sharing their personal experience, helping a graduate student with her studies, and advancing sociological research on Black women. Women who agreed to "member check" received an additional $15 gift card.

## Procedures

*Research team.* The team included the primary investigator and two research assistants. Their responsibilities entailed support with recruiting participants, conducting some interviews, transcribing qualitative interviews, and some preliminary analysis in the form of "member checking." I recruited two women, Black, undergraduate students from UCR who were Sociology majors in good academic standing to assist in the research process. I also intentionally recruited upper-classmen students who have taken the required research methods course and some upper-division courses (in race and gender), thus having some familiarity with the research process and subject. Having two Black women research assistants in this research project was particularly beneficial as they had "insider" status based on race and gender which facilitated rapport with the participants in the recruitment process. Also, the research assistants conducted two interviews and assisted in "member checking" the interpretation of the findings (Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett 2003).

*Training.* Prior to conducting interviews, I trained both the research assistants in conducting qualitative interviews. I focused on certain issues arising in interviews about sex, such as how to elicit responses to intimate questions. After the training, the research assistants conducted one practice interview in order to gain familiarity with the interview protocol and hone their skills. These practice interviews were not incorporated in the overall data. After reviewing the interviews they conducted, I debriefed with the research assistants about the audio recordings and transcripts to provide feedback and further guidance.

Throughout the data collection period, I held regular supervisory meetings with the research assistants to discuss emerging findings and address any problems. We reviewed transcripts to identify themes, topics to probe in future interviews, strategies for improving interview technique, and interview questions that may require modification. I also trained the research assistants on transcribing audio-recorded interviews. The research assistants earned academic credit under the dissertation chair's, Dr. Nieri, supervision.

*Interviews*. I conducted one-time, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews at a location and time of the participant's preference. Interviews occurred at my private university office (n = 17), coffee shop (n = 10), participants' work office (n = 2), or a private residence (n = 2). Interviews were digitally recorded and lasted on average an hour and a half, a reasonable time frame for this type of research (Hermanowicz 2002). At the start of the interview, I provided a brief summary of the project, communicated the risks and benefits of study participation, and administered a consent form that includes permission to digitally record the interview (Hermanowicz 2002). Before concluding the interview, I asked participants to complete a one-page, paper-and-pencil survey, which contained demographic questions. After the interview, I immediately recorded field notes to contextualize such things as participants' appearance, body size, body language during the interview (particularly if certain questions elicited a response), skin tone (or color), and facial expressions. I also utilized the field notes to work through preliminary themes that emerged from the interviews as well as any unanticipated findings that unfolded

during the interviews. I incorporated the field notes in the software program to help refine my analysis.

I employed several strategies to develop rapport with participants, particularly as Black women's sexuality is a sensitive topic and given the historic exploitation of Black women in academic research (Twine 2000). First, studies suggest that giving participants some control over the interview process will alleviate some anxiety from the participant who is participating in a study about sexuality (Catania, Binson, Peterson, and Canchola 1997; McGuffey 2013). Therefore, the participants chose the location and time of the interview in order to have control over the social environment. Second, I spent time at the start of the meeting, prior to asking interview questions, explaining the intent of the study and what I will do with the findings; these actions were designed to address participants' potential concerns that the research might reinforce negative stereotypes about African-American women. I also communicated why I am interested in studying this topic (e.g., include the perspectives of African-American women in the scholarship) and why I care about this project (as I am not an African-American woman) to transcend the insider-outsider boundary, which elicited more honest self-disclosure from participants. Third, I approached the interviews as "conversations" in order to enhance rapport with the participants and to foster a comfortable interview environment (Carpenter 2005). Furthermore, I engaged in mutual sharing, where appropriate, to "equalize" the interview and subvert the researcher-participant hierarchy -- for example, I, as the principal investigator, answered any questions participants had regarding my personal life and shared details about my own personal experiences to reduce unequal power relations

inherent in interviews (Carpenter 2005; Few et al. 2003; Gailey 2014). The majority of women directed questions about my racial background and how it shaped my personal dating experiences and body image. Last, I emphasized that the interview was completely voluntary and confidential, and that participants could skip any question and/or end the interview at any point without penalty. No participant exercised this option to end the interview.

These procedures were tested in a pilot interview in October, 2015, in Los Angeles, California, with a physically active, self-identified heterosexual, African-American woman. I conducted the interview with the participant, which lasted an hour and a half. After the interview, I debriefed with the participant about her interview experience and she considered it enjoyable. The interview process provided invaluable insight to modify some aspects of the interview protocol (such as re-wording questions deemed confusing). I subsequently modified the interview protocol, changing terms to align them with those more commonly used in the Black community, providing more specifications to broader questions, and removing some questions that were repetitive.

*Data preparation.* After the interviews were conducted, the audio files, field notes, transcriptions, and analysis database were stored on my personal, password-protected computer. I assigned pseudonyms to each participant and used them in any research report to protect participants' identities. Information on the participants' identity was stored separately from the interview data so that only I could link participants to their interview (and not my research assistants). Interviews were transcribed by me, the research team, or a professional service.

*Member Checking*. At various points during data collection and analysis, I engaged in "member checking." "Member checking" involves reviewing interpretation of the data and preliminary findings with study participants that serves as a validity check (Cho and Trent 2006; Koelsch 2013). I triangulated the data through "member checking" to facilitate the co-creation of knowledge with research participants (Few 2007). "Member checking" ensured that I was self-reflexive throughout the analytic process and unearthed any theoretical blindspots I potentially possessed. I conducted "member checking" with three participants at several time points in the research process - after conducting 10 interviews, after 25 interviews, and after completion of the interviews. The "member checks" took place over the phone and lasted one hour. I sent the preliminary findings to the participant in the form of a write-up (two- pages) prior to the phone conversation. We discussed my interpretation of the findings and whether she had any comments or feedback on my interpretation. I took notes during this conversation and incorporated them as memos in the software program. I used the notes from "member-checking" to re-think coding schemes, and at times, re-frame my analysis.

## Constructs

The interviews asked participants about their partnered sexual experiences and their body image (see full interview protocol in Appendix B). To examine the women's experiences of sex, specifically how they conceptualize sexual pleasure (Question 1), I asked, "What are the primary reasons you have sex," "How would you define sexual satisfaction," "Describe your ideal sex life," and "How do you evaluate your own sexual performance." To assess the extent to which the women feel their expectations of sex are

met and whether they have positive and/or negative sexual experiences, I asked, “In your most recent sexual encounter, was this (your) expectation met,” “What would improve your sexual satisfaction,” “What would improve your sex life,” and “Many women report that their desire to have sex and their actual sexual activity sometimes differ. Does this happen to you.” To address the role of the partner, I asked, “What do you expect your partner to do during sex,” “Is it important for your partner to have an orgasm,” and “Many women report that they agree to have sex with a partner because their partner wants them to. Does this happen to you.” Last, to provide a holistic understanding of women’s sexuality, I examined what women consider their best and worst sexual experience and asked “Can you talk about what you consider to be the best sexual experience of your life” and “Can you talk about what you consider to be the worst sexual experience of your life.”

To address women’s how stereotypes of Black women’s sexuality inform their sexual selves (Question 2), I asked “What are some stereotypes you hear about African American women’s sexual behavior” and “Have these affected your sexual behavior in any way?" These questions were intentionally broad for the participants to guide the discussion of how racialized sexual stereotypes shape Black women’s sexuality.

To examine the relationship between body image and sexuality (Question 3), I asked questions about how the women evaluate their bodies (e.g., “Do you feel pressured to obtain an ideal body,” “How would you describe your physical health,” “How do you feel about your body”) and by what criteria (e.g., “Can you describe your ideal body”). I intentionally To examine the external messages the women receive about their bodies, I

asked, “Tell me about a time that you received positive comments about your body,” “Tell me about a time that you received negative comments about your body,” and “Do you receive comments about your body from your current sexual partner.” I also asked, “Many women report that their feelings about their own bodies affect their experience of sex. Is that true for you?” In addition, I asked about several specific factors that may affect the sexual experience (e.g., “Can you describe your ideal body,” “How do you feel about nudity, along and with your partner,” “Do you have the lights on during sex,” “How do you feel about having sex while menstruating,” and “It is common for women to report their sexual experiences are affected by circumstances in their lives. What kinds of things, if any, have affected your sex life.” This will illuminate how women draw on broader discourses of race, gender, class, and sexuality to construct their body image. Also, this will reveal how women describe their bodies specifically during sex and how expectations of Black women’s bodies may shape their sexual experiences.

Some interview questions are modified versions of questions used in another study on women’s sexuality (see Fahs 2011). Throughout the interview, I was sensitive to the context of women’s sexual experiences in terms of their relationship status, types of sexual acts women engage in, and partner’s sexual performance. I probed for this information when appropriate in order contextualize their narratives. In addition to questions on the aforementioned topics, I gathered demographic information from participants: age, education, occupation, sexual history, current relationship status, and health status (see survey in Appendix C).

## Analysis and Analytical Framework

I utilized Atlas.ti 7, a qualitative analysis software program, to store and analyze the data after they were transcribed. I added the transcripts and field notes to this program. Later, I added memos, which will also become part of the database. I utilized SPSS, a quantitative analysis software program, to compile and produce a descriptive analysis of the data from the demographic survey.

After the transcripts were stored in Atlas.ti 7, I employed inductive coding methods developed by Glaser and Strauss ([1967] 2006). I combed through each transcript several times and identified emergent themes. I developed a coding scheme that organized broad themes such as "body image," "messages about body," "sexual pleasure," and "stereotypes" without imposing predetermined codes. I then generated sub-codes to refine my coding scheme. Throughout the coding process, I developed analytical memos that I used to re-think the relationship among codes as well as detect negative cases. The analysis involved constant comparative methods in order to generate conceptual categories and properties of those categories and cluster themes (Glaser and Strauss [1967] 2006). This analytical framework was well suited for this project in order to describe how Black women construct their sexual experiences and their bodies, and to generate theory to explain relations among the constructs. This analytical framework facilitated group comparisons given there is sufficient variation in the data.

First, I examined women's construction of their sexuality in terms of the conceptualization of sexual pleasure and expectations of sex in their lives. I assessed this through their responses how women subjectively evaluate sexual encounters. I searched

for different manifestations of women's embodiment (i.e., are they focused on the experience of their body or in control of their body) and disembodiment (i.e., are they concerned with their body image or uninterested in the sexual encounter) in their sexual narratives. For example, if a woman described feeling physically present in the sexual encounter and describes it as sexually pleasurable, I will consider that embodied. Furthermore, while the goal of the research is to examine under what conditions women have positive and pleasurable sexual experiences (as reflected in the research questions), I also examined women's negative sexual experiences through asking what women consider their worst sexual experience. This may elicit narratives of sexual violence and/or rape (even if women do not label it as such). I analyzed these narratives as sexual violence and domination against their bodies and more broadly, as the consequence of a white supremacist, hetero-patriarchal society that works to oppress Black women (McGuffey 2013).

Second, I examined Black women's body image across the three dimensions: physical appearance, health, and physical ability/fitness. I examined variation within and across these three dimensions. For example, do women hold positive evaluations of their physical appearance but negative evaluations of their health and physical ability/fitness? Or do women describe positive feelings about their weight but not skin color? I then compared the body image of women who subscribe to the dominant body ideal, cultural body ideal, some combination of both, or neither. For example, I expected to find that women who subscribe to the cultural body ideal to evaluate their bodies more positively (particularly in terms of the physical appearance dimension) than women who subscribe

to the dominant body ideal. Furthermore, I contextualized women's body image by assessing in what context women invoke a particular ideal (e.g., daily life, sexual encounters) and how their narratives reflect the ideal they subscribe to. I then examined variation in women's body image by external messages they receive about their bodies. Also, I examined variation in body image by the source of information relaying the messages about bodies, such as a romantic/sexual partner. This revealed how broader structures of racial, gender, and sexual inequalities shape women's bodies and expectations of the "ideal" body.

## Considering Positionality

My identity shapes the research process. I am a middle-class, heterosexual, biracial European- and Asian-American woman. My thin, light-skinned, fit body meets the dominant body ideal. While I share a racial minority status with the participants, I am afforded greater racial privilege vis-a-vis African-American women due to my biracial European- and Asian-American identity (Bonilla-Silva 2004). Therefore, my status as an outsider to the group under study and my privilege (via racial status, class status, skin color, and body type) may present challenges to the research process in terms of data collection and analysis. For this reason, I designed the research process to include various techniques in the interview process to establish rapport with participants such as "member checking" (Koelsch 2013). While I do not have racial congruity with the participants and may have social class, age, skin-color, and body shape congruity with only some participants, I do share experiences of being a racially marginalized heterosexual woman who is physically active. I disclosed my racial identity as many

participants asked about my research interests in studying Black women's sexuality and body image (as a non-Black woman). I shared that this dissertation project emerged from my Master's Thesis which examined Black women's sexuality in the "hook up" context in college. Sharing my career trajectory (and dedication to this project) may have minimized any concern participants had on participating in the study.

Research can be conducted on an outside population without perpetuating injustice or misrepresentation. Some scholars argue that conducting research as an "outsider" is not entirely problematic, particularly in the data analysis portion. Research by outsider scholars has been successfully conducted on African-American women (see Chito-Childs 2005; Lau 2011; Miller 2001). My identity is salient in the recruitment and interviewing process as I do not share the same race with participants. However, the social distance in the interviews was beneficial in terms of participants providing more detailed and precise explanations of meanings that may be taken-for-granted with an interviewer who matches race (Miller 2001: 32). That is, the interviews provided an opportunity for Black women to serve as "experts" who taught me about their social world due to my "outsider" status (Miller 2001: 32).

Moreover, researchers assure that "outsiders" can effectively conduct interviews who approach their participants with "credibility and approachability" (Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman 2017). First, credibility refers to trustworthiness relying on the researcher's ability to demonstrate their knowledge of the population and phenomena under study, which is achieved through either cultural competence and/or institutional status (Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman 2017). To accomplish credibility, I was

transparent about my research intentions at the onset of the interview, my career trajectory studying Black women's sexuality (to signal that I had dedicated years to better understanding Black women's lives), and the ultimate goal of the project (to capture Black women's sexual lives from their vantage point) which I believed mitigated any concerns participants had about involvement in the study (Arriola et al. 2007). Additionally, as the majority of women in my sample were either in college or received a bachelor's degree, my university affiliation might have instilled more credibility, particularly with older participants. Also, that many of the women in the sample were recruited through snowball sample may have generated trust given a friend or family member already participated in the study and "vouched" for me.

Secondly, approachability refers to presenting as nonthreatening and safe. Given that I was especially concerned with making sure my participants felt "emotionally" safe during the interview, I negotiated this by reminding them they could pause and/or stop the interview and engaged in "vulnerable listening" to affirm their experiences (McClelland 2017). Two participants asked to pause the interview for a brief moment and both had resumed the interview. Furthermore, I believe our shared experiences of being (non-white) women may have led to mutual understandings and yielded frank conversations about their sexual lives. Several participants shared post-interview that I was approachable and speaking with me was "easy" (even on such a private subject), and I set a comfortable and affirming interview environment. In fact, several women disclosed "less savory" sexual experiences (Carpenter 2005: 210) and/or accounts of sexual violence – which indicated that gained I rapport with the majority of the

participants. In the tradition of critical race feminist methodology, I also invited women to ask me questions after the interview to redistribute power and to engage in the ethics of reciprocity and transparency (Carpenter 2005; Collins 1998; Huisman 2008; Oakley 1981). Combined, I believe these factors significantly contributed to women's willingness to participate in the study and share their intimate stories with me. Therefore, I constantly reflected on my outsider status and how it shaped this research process while maintaining a critical race feminist lens in the data analysis (Tinker and Armstrong 2008).

## Human Subjects Issues

This study posed minimal risk to participants. The study's questions about women's sexual experiences and body image, however, may have produced some psychological discomfort during and/or after the interview. I provided to each participant at the end of the contact a list of free local counseling resources.

## Limitations

Several study limitations should be considered. First, as noted in other research on women's sexuality (see Parvez 2006), there is a possible self-selection bias in the sample for women who are more comfortable and interested discussing their sexuality with a researcher. Additionally, women who have bodies closer to the dominant or Black cultural ideal might feel more comfortable being interviewed about their body image. Therefore, these findings may not capture women who are more private with their sexual experiences and/or body image. Second, social desirability in responses is also a common concern in qualitative research, particularly in research about sexuality (Carpenter 2005;

Laumann et al. 1994). That is, to "save face" (Goffman 1967), participants may respond in ways that to protect their reputation. Third, the sample is limited to physically active women and heterosexual women. The study's findings may not apply to women who don't engage in physical activity or women who do not identify as heterosexual. Fourth, this study is limited to a specific geographic region (Southern California), which may have a particular racial climate, dating/sexual market, and demographic composition. This region is reputed to be more body focused due to the warmer climate (i.e., showing more body) and proximity to the entertainment industry that might promote negative body image as a result relative to the rest of the country. Also, those living in a metropolitan location with a higher percentage of Blacks and potentially greater diversity of images of Black women's sexuality may have more positive ideas about sexuality as opposed to those living in more rural areas with limited images.

# CHAPTER 4

## Black Women's Conceptualizations of Sexual Pleasure

In this chapter, I examine how African-American women conceptualize sexual pleasure and how their accounts reflect and/or challenge the broader hegemonic discourses of Black sexuality and womanhood. Centering Black sexual pleasure is part of a liberatory Black Feminist framework that ushers in a broader understanding of Black sexuality beyond the current limiting, and pathologizing, risk/deficit model that dominates the social science research (Bowleg, Tschann, and Lucas 2012; Nash 2014; Jones 2018). This chapter illustrates the social construction of sexual pleasure within the context of heterosexual sex and its broader implications for Black sexualities research, particularly raising insights on what promotes pleasure for women. As we currently know relatively little of how Black women conceptualize sexual pleasure, I explore intra-group variation rather than racial-group comparisons to begin a sociological theory of pleasure, particularly for groups whose pleasure has been denied within the context of racial inequality and gender subordination (Morgan 2016). That is, by centering Black women's narratives and uncovering women's beliefs about sexual pleasure, I bridge the literatures on intersectionality, sexualities, and the body.

## Background Literature

### *Theoretical Perspectives of Black Women's Sexuality*

Historically, Black women's bodies have been involuntarily sites of power relations (Collins 2005). Hegemonic standards of sexuality are incongruent with the lived experiences of women of color as these standards rely on white, middle-class norms.

While white, middle-class women are encouraged to explore their sexuality, albeit within the confines of a monogamous, heterosexual relationship (Rubin 1986), institutional racism prevents women of color from the same freedom to explore erotic possibilities (Lorde 1986; Nagel 2000). In fact, the construction of Black women's sexual deviance hinges on the long-standing belief that they pose a threat to society and their sexual agency has the capacity to disrupt the moral social order (Nash 2014). This construction, however, reinforces social conditions that continue to marginalize and punish Black women's sexuality (Jordan-Zachery 2017). As a result, the dominant discourse on Black women's sexuality is oriented within a negative framework (Collins 2005).

Representations of Black women contribute to the negative and destructive beliefs of them as promiscuous and sexually "other" (Collins 2005; Emerson 2002). While white women's sexuality historically been protected due to beliefs of sexual purity and passivity (hooks 1992; Roberts 1997; White 2001), this construction has historically precluded Black women. Instead, two dominant archetypes emerge that perpetuate racist beliefs about African-American women. First, the "jezebel" image asserts that Black women are hypersexual and sexually aggressive, willing to have sex at any given moment. This image emerged from the historical legacy of slavery whereby white slave owners routinely sexually assaulted enslaved women to assert dominance, instill terror, and increase the slave labor through offspring. To rationalize sexual violence, slave owners claimed that enslaved women seduced them to fulfill their own sexual desires, effectively creating a myth of Black hypersexuality. Although the term "jezebel" is not commonly used in contemporary language, the idea remains as a pivotal cultural

understanding (and misconception) of Black women's sexuality and is deployed to fuel sexual racism and in turn, may shape how they think about their sexuality and sexual pleasure.

Second, the cultural belief of Black women's sexual deviance further gained momentum in the national conversation with Moynihan's controversial report of Black families (1967). He argued that the social ills that plagued Black communities could be traced to an "unstable" family structure, that is an absent father, while blaming Black mothers for violating gendered and racialized norms of marriage and sexual relationships (1967). The Moynihan report fueled this negative imagery of Black women who were considered as jeopardizing their families by remaining unmarried with children. Weaponizing the report as a way to punish Black mothers, the "welfare queen" emerged that characterized Black women as wielding their (hyper)sexuality to "[breed] uncontrollably" and to exploit the welfare system in an effort to obtain government assistance while remaining unemployed (Stephen and Phillips 2000: 9). Under this construction, Black women intentionally create a cycle of destitution by relying on welfare checks, thus draining the state of limited funds (Berger and Simon 2014). The "welfare queen" image not only perpetuates the cultural myth of Black women's hypersexuality, but also depicts them as deceitful and therefore, undeserving of public assistance.

While Both the "jezebel" and "welfare mother" diverge in expectations of Black womanhood, both archetypes share the cultural assumption of Black promiscuity and sexual "excessiveness" (Nash 2014), marking Black women as disrupting the ideals of

sexual chasteness. These discourses effectively reinforce entrenched historical stereotypes, and their subsequent permutations, that construct Black women's sexuality as pathological and immoral, and are used to justify state-sanctioned violence against African-American women's bodies (Hill 2005). In addition to the violent realities that African-American women experience due to racial stereotypes, the construction of Black sexual pathology cements racial boundaries in the U.S. racial order (Nagel 1993: 125).

As a response to the deeply negative construction of African-American women's sexuality, Black feminist research has devoted great attention to women's sexual injustices. Existing research documents their disproportionate rates of sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS (Otto-Salaj et al. 2008), hypersexualization of Black women's bodies in media (Collins 2005), sexual violence in interpersonal relationships (McGuffey 2013), and institutionalized violence against Black women (Arnold 1990). While research has importantly addressed the myriad of ways in which African-American women's sexual oppression manifests, this empirical focus on oppression also produces a noticeable sexual conservatism in the Black sexualities literature. This focus may reflect a concern that research focusing on Black sexual pleasure potentially reinforces long-standing stereotypes of blackness as deviant. Indeed, respectability politics suggests that some African-American women strategically assimilate to white, heterosexual middle-class norms by embodying the "respectable" Black woman to shield themselves from discrimination and sexual racism (Hammonds 2002). Therefore, respectability politics demand that African-American women subscribe to sexual norms that repress their sexual agency and desires for "[Black] racial uplift"

(Lee 2010: viii). However, the power of respectability politics also has residual effects on shaping research within Black sexualities. Respectability politics may, inadvertently, sanitize research inquiries that center Black women's sexual pleasure and desires (Cohen, 1997; Cooper, 2018; Dickerson & Rosseau 2009; Lindsey 2013; Jones 2018; Spillers 1984). Yet, this avoidance leads to an "epistemological respectability" that can chiefly explain the lack of research theorizing Black sexual pleasure (Nash 2008: 53) and obscure the ways in which sexuality is also a site for pleasure and empowerment for marginalized groups (Jones 2018).

As Black women's sexuality is rendered as either "absent or impulsive" in the social science literature (Hargons et al. 2018: 2), some Black feminist scholars have pushed to disrupt this binary around Black women's sexual pleasure by examining the discourses that challenge this view of Black women's sexuality (Chepp 2015; Cohen 2004; Jones 2018; Lee 2010; Lindsey 2015; Morgan 2015). As Joan Morgan (2015) notes, Black feminist scholarship has long dodged questions about Black women's sexual pleasure and remained underdeveloped (for an exception see Rose 2003). Recent scholarship heeds this call to directly recognize Black sexual pleasure as a legitimate theoretical pursuit. For example, Patterson-Faye (2016) examines how Black women conceptualize sexy in the plus size fashion world and redefine what constitutes sexual attractiveness. Other research investigates representations of pleasure in Black women's performances in pornography (Cruz 2016; Miller-Young 2008; Nash 2008). While examining Black women's involvement in pornography illustrates how capitalism commodifies Black women's sexual exploitation, it tells us little about how sexual

pleasure operates in African-American women's everyday lives (Holland 2012). In other words, the study of African-American women's sexual pleasure has largely been a theoretical pursuit, rather than empirical. However, scholars argue that respectability politics, although presumed as an antidote to discrimination, reinforce gender inequalities since they (1) require Black women, not men, to police their sexual desires and (2) position Black women to shoulder the responsibility of rescuing their communities (Cooper 2018). Furthermore, while an attempt to stave off gendered racism, this regulatory mechanism further marginalizes Black women who cannot (or perhaps refuse to) meet its classed and heteronormative ideals (Ray 2018).

The power of respectability politics also has residual effects on shaping research within Black sexualities. Respectability politics may, inadvertently, sanitize research inquiries that center Black women's sexual pleasure and desires (Cohen 1997; Cooper 2018; Dickerson and Rosseau 2009; Lindsey 2013; Jones 2018; Spillers 1984). The resiliency of respectability politics has produced an uncomfortable relationship in the Black feminist scholarship to avoid exploring sexual pleasure within a sex-positivist framework (Nash 2008). In other words, as to not reinforce enduring stereotypes of Black women's sexual deviancy, Black scholars have historically been preoccupied with sexual trauma, exploitation, and violence as their empirical entry point into women's sexual lives. Indeed, Black feminist scholarship has placed a premium on rigorously investigating Black women's accounts of sexual violence and the structures that engender such violence directed at Black women (French 2012; Hattery 2009; McGuffey 2013). Research that centers Black sexual pleasure is too often perceived as a trivial, even

"unfeminist," pursuit within the broader context of sexual violence and discrimination (Morgan 2015). Yet, this avoidance leads to an "epistemological respectability" that can chiefly explain the lack of research theorizing Black sexual pleasure (Nash 2008: 53) and obscure the ways in which sexuality is also a site for pleasure, empowerment for marginalized groups (Jones 2018). Therefore, the focus on sexual violence and exploitation overshadows how sexuality

Few qualitative studies explore African-American women's subjective sexual experiences – that is, what they define as sexual pleasure and what they find sexually enjoyable (Hargons et al. 2018). Understanding what women define as sexual pleasure also reveals the sexual politics and broader patterns of inequality. Therefore, shifting away from the "at-risk" and epidemiological outcomes perspective of Black women's sexuality that dominates the social science literature, I explore the nuances of women's sexual pleasure through their own narratives, capturing how women "tell" their story (Rose 2003).

Understanding Black women's sexual pleasure is a significant sociological enterprise for three reasons. First, the broader literature on sexual pleasure and enjoyment overwhelmingly focuses on sexual "dysfunction" and problems (Fahs and Plante 2017). More specifically, this focus starts from the vantage point of women's pleasure and sexual satisfaction as inherently problematic, difficult to achieve, and elusive (Jackson and Scott 2007). The "dysfunction" narrative conjoined with the Black sexual pathology discourse further perpetuates racist beliefs that Black women are prone to sexual ills and unpleasurable sexual experiences. By reorienting the literature that overwhelming focuses

on Black women's sexuality as dangerous, risky, and immoral, I provide a balance to the sexualities literature by highlighting women's pleasurable sexual experiences.

Second, defining what constitutes pleasure incites fierce debates in the feminist scholarship. Some scholars view the orgasm-centered pleasure imperative as stemming from an androcentric, medicalized framework wherein an orgasm is characterized as a "measurable outcome" of sex (Frith 2013). That is, having an orgasm becomes a constant preoccupation during sex to signal a healthy, sexually satisfying life. Under this logic, the absence of an orgasm would signal an unhealthy, non-normative sexual encounter that requires medical intervention. While these cultural ideas insist women that have orgasms in order to fulfill heterosexual imperatives of sex, consistent findings on the rate of women's orgasm in heterosexual encounters indicate a profound imbalance coined the "orgasm gap" (Armstrong et al. 2012; Heldman and Wade 2010; Wade, Kremer and Brown 2005). Feminist scholarship has highlighted how women's lower rates of experiencing orgasms reflect gendered power imbalances that 1) privileges intercourse as the defining sexual practice and the logical culmination of sex, and 2) treats women's orgasm as less valuable. Race and class analyses complicate the "orgasm gap" where studies reveal that less privileged women experience less sexual satisfaction than their white counterparts, suggesting that pleasurable sex is a form of "capital" unequally accessible to women (Fahs and Swank 2010; Gonzales and Rolison 2005). The construction of sexual pleasure provides a rich insight to how African-American women conceptualize the role of orgasm (if any) in their sexual lives and I do not assume a priori that women consider orgasm as the central feature of sexual pleasure.

Third, I address a central concern in Black feminist scholarship by focusing on women's sexual subjectivity and agency. Black feminist scholarship demonstrates how racial and gender oppression rally to suppress women's sexuality (Holland 2012). That is, while the racial grammar to describe Black women's bodily injury and trauma is significantly developed in Black feminist scholarship, less research has examined Black women's resilience to these structural inequalities within the context of sexual experiences (see Miller-Young 2008; Nash 2008). As Foucault (1978) argues, power engenders resistance. While society attempts to place Black women's sexuality under constant surveillance (e.g., through disseminating national statistics of sexual health risks and racialized sexual stereotypes), this facilitates subversive spaces for women to resist dominant narratives and explore their sexuality (Chepp 2015). As Tricia Rose (2003: 385) notes, "Black women's complex sexual lives are caught between a racial/sexual mainstream cultural rock and a counternarrative hard place," Using Black women's conceptualization(s) of sexual pleasure offers a potentially more nuanced understanding of how sexual pleasure factors into women's sexual lives.

My goal in this chapter is to carve out a theoretical space to understand Black women's sexual pleasure. This chapter expands research on the ways heterosexual African-American women define pleasurable sexual encounters in partnered sexual activity. How women describe their sexual pleasure draws attention to the various interpretations of embodied sexual experiences, and to African-American women's entitlement to sexual pleasure. In the following section, I present the sexual landscape of women's sexual narratives, focusing on what they consider sexually pleasurable

experiences. By understanding how sexual pleasure manifests in women's lives, we take seriously the accounts of historically marginalized voices and a group whose bodies have been colonized. To answer these questions, I asked respondents questions about their sexual lives and what they define as sexual pleasure to better develop a "politics of articulation" (Hammonds 1999).

One of the prominent challenges in Black feminist theory has been to reconcile Black women's historical legacies of sexual violence and trauma while acknowledging the possibilities of sexual desire and pleasure (Chepp 2016). Responding to this call, I attempt to broaden our understanding of Black sexual pleasure and how women's sexual expectations are encased in sexual politics (Collins 2005; Nash 2018). This chapter will help us re-frame the risk narrative deeply invested in the social science literature, and instead, generate new ways of thinking about Black women's sexuality. Therefore, I pose questions that seek to better understand the discourses around Black women's sexual pleasure: 1) How are women defining what counts as sexual pleasure? How did respondents arrive at these definitions? 2) How do their narratives fit in the broader theoretical debates of sexual pleasure in women's lives, particularly women of color's lives?

## Analysis

In this chapter, I asked participants about their definitions and experiences with sexual pleasure. Specifically, I asked: "Sexual satisfaction and pleasure can be described in several ways. How would you define sexual satisfaction?" I followed up with: "What do you consider good or great sex?" and "Is it important for you to have an orgasm (and

why)?" I also inquired about what conditions or factors would improve their sexual pleasure. I protect the identities of respondents by assigning pseudonyms and alter potentially identifying information. However, I do share their relationship status and age.

## Findings

When asking respondents how they define sexual pleasure, it became clear that the definition was not straightforward or clear to them. A small number of respondents expressed difficulty in answering the question, responding with "I don't know," "sexual pleasure is complicated," or paused for a while before answering this question. That several women demonstrated this inability to define sexual pleasure was not surprising, given society's deep ambivalence towards women's, and in particular, Black women's, sexuality and sexual pleasure. This difficultly in defining sexual pleasure was evident in the narratives, regardless of women's relationships status, age, educational attainment, and health status. Despite some women's difficulty in responding, their responses in the sample revealed three main themes oriented around sexual pleasure: minimization of sexual pleasure for an emotional connection, entitlement to sexual pleasure, and sexual pleasure as challenging the emotional/physical binary. In the following sections, I discuss how women conceptualize sexual pleasure as (1) pleasuring, (2) purpose, and (3) process.

### *Pleasure as Pleasuring*

When asked about their ideas about sexual pleasure, a handful of women described feelings of physical enjoyment, but rather they emphasized the emotional connection with their partners. Most women in this group reported having orgasms and said they enjoyed them when they had them. However, they did not define orgasms as

central to or necessary for their sexual pleasure. In this definition, pleasure stemmed from either establishing or maintaining an emotional connection with their sexual partner. Therefore, women prioritized the emotional relationship over physical pleasure. For example, Charlene, a forty-two-year-old married professional, discussed sexual pleasure occurring when:

> Something in you feels satisfied. It just feels good. When you actually like the person. I definitely know…. I can definitely attest sex is different when you like the person than when you just met them [randomly]. Having sex with someone that you actually like, get to know, feels way better. It just feels right, [rather] than having sex with a random person. I have to be attracted to the person to have sex with them. I feel attraction builds stronger and stronger once you get to know the person. 'Cause you can see a cute guy on the street and he's cute, but then if you get to know him, the attraction is just more. You get butterflies in your stomach when you see him. All that leads up to having really good sex.

Along with Charlene, women in this group underscored that the choice of partner matters; it deeply related to their sense of sexual pleasure. As Rihanna, a twenty-year-old-student in a relationship, put it, sexual pleasure can only come from someone "attached" or "connected" so that it's "meaningful." Thus, the view is that sex with some partners will be more pleasurable, by definition, if the partner is someone to whom the woman feels emotionally connected.

While women in this group prioritized emotional connection over physical sexual satisfaction, they did mention how an orgasm factored into their conceptualizations of sexual pleasure. Sade suggested that sex with someone with whom there is no emotional connection could involve (temporary) physical satisfaction, i.e., an orgasm, but it might be accompanied by emotional dissatisfaction shortly afterward. She said, "'Cause you can have sex with someone, and you could climax. But then if you feel icky about it

afterwards, then you're not going to be satisfied." Physical pleasure through orgasm might not prevent eventual emotional dissatisfaction if there are no emotional ties to the partner. For Sade, sexual pleasure hinges on the context of the relationship. Similarly, Yolanda considered the relationship as contributing to sexual pleasure. She stated that sexual pleasure is "not just the physical aspect of sex. Everything leading up to that moment is important. You know? Just hanging out or having experiences together. Having some common ground to talk about, some commonality." Alexis, a nineteen-year-old-student in a relationship shared these sentiments. For Alexis, her sexual pleasure hinged on "[building] a deeper connection with someone before you have sex." Whether it's establishing a relationship or devoting time to one another in a relationship, the focus on the relationship sets up the conditions for Sade, Yolanda and Alexis to have pleasure during the sexual interaction.

These quotes might suggest that what the partner does in the sexual interaction (i.e., specific sexual acts) is less important for pleasure than *who* the partner is. However, the narratives demonstrated that the partner's actions matter too. For example, women who defined sexual pleasure as an emotional connection commonly mentioned that a partner's efforts to create a "romantic" experience contributed to sexual pleasure. Describing a partner in a sexually pleasurable encounter, Sade stated:

> I would have to say him just being extremely romantic. Give me [a] back massage, and then having the music playing, and then we kinda go into being intimate. Not just coming home and being, "Hey, I want to have sex." Just easing your way, making me feel special, not making me feel like I'm just a product or something.

Sade's concern that her partner doesn't treat her as a "product" is understandable in a culture that racially codes African-American women as hypersexual (Collins 2005; hooks 1992). Therefore, her partner's engagement in intimate acts mitigates the possibility of feeling (sexually) objectified.

Just as the partner's actions matter for the woman's pleasure, the woman's actions also matter. For example, pleasuring the partner is viewed as fostering an emotional connection and affection and thus, eliciting pleasure for the woman. Mariah, a thirty-seven-year-old professional in a long-term marriage, said, "I don't even have to have the climax. I feel like as long as my husband has the climax, then I'm happy." Although according to Mariah, "90 percent of the time" both she and her partner have orgasms, her orgasm is not required for her to experience sexual pleasure or a complete and satisfying interaction.

Sam is thirty-two-year-old and currently single. She described in great detail a past relationship that ended several years ago on bad terms that involved her partner's cheating. Now, she is currently dating but hesitant to engage in what she calls "meaningless sex" that just "satisfies you in the moment." When asked what she considered sexual pleasure, she replied:

> I'm satisfied when my body has an orgasm. I think there's a little bit more than an orgasm, but I don't know how to explain: when I'm satisfied versus not satisfied. Because even if I don't have an orgasm, I'm still satisfied because I pleased my partner. A lot of times the pleasure of my partner or how much they enjoyed it is satisfaction for me. Where it's, "That was really right," or "It felt so good," or "It was so warm." You have the intimacy and the activity ended. Even though I didn't have an orgasm, I still feel it was still satisfying because I was able to please the person that I was attracted to or intimate with.

Like Mariah, then, Sam stated that her partner's satisfaction equated to "pleasure on both ends." Both Mariah and Sam underscored intimacy with a partner that produces sexual pleasure, potentially not activated with a "one-night stand" or someone they did not have an intimate connection.

The aforementioned women reported having had orgasms but defined them as a less significant form of pleasure than emotional connection. In contrast, Monique, who also defined sexual pleasure as emotional connection, had not ever had an orgasm. In her words, "I haven't really reached that area yet." Her definition of sexual pleasure might change to one of the other two definitions if she experienced orgasms as a routine part of her sexual activity. The narratives of women with this definition were notable in that they featured certain terms. Sex was a source of emotional pleasure. Even when the body was mentioned, it was interpreted in emotional terms. For example, Sade mentioned that she receives pleasure from vaginal intercourse in that it gives her an "enveloped" sensation, alluding to the emotional connection that she feels with her partner.

Monique described sexual pleasure as rooted in the relationship with her partner, and in fact, sex was not physically enjoyable for her. She said:

> I wouldn't define [sex] as, I don't think it's pleasurable. I just would define it as expressing yourself to show how much you love the other person, or your partner that you're with. I kinda see it as a bondingship, but that's pretty much it.

Monique was the only respondent to consider sex as not physically pleasurable. She emphasized the expression of affection for her partner. In fact, her definition of sexual pleasure involves building the relationship or taking it to the "next level."

*Beliefs about sexual pleasure: emotional satisfaction because women's orgasms are "elusive"*

As with women who defined sexual pleasure as pleasuring, these women's conceptualizations of sexual pleasure expected sex to build or cement the relationship with the partner. This idea aligns with the dominant cultural imperative that women direct their sexual desires towards relationship maintenance or strengthening the relationship's commitment (Elliott and Umberson, 2008). For example, Sade mentioned that she receives pleasure from vaginal intercourse in that it gives her an "enveloped" sensation as opposed to clitoral stimulation, which she describes as "too direct." Her response alludes to an emotional connection that she feels with her partner while engaging in vaginal intercourse and indicates that her sexual pleasure predominantly stems from this particular sexual practice. Sade later discussed having uncertainty on the "right" way to produce orgasms because she "[hasn't] quite figured that out yet." That Sade expressed concern about having sex the "right" way reflects the deeply heteronormative erotic scripts about what is considered "normal" sexual practices (Foucault 1978).

Women in this group also exhibited distinctive beliefs about what elicits sexual pleasure – in particular, ideas about men's and women's bodies' ability to have orgasms. For example, Breeyan described men's orgasms as easy and attributed this ease to men having less complicated "organs" than women. This understanding helps her make sense of the disproportionate rate of orgasm in her experiences. However, attributing the orgasm gap between men and women to organs (i.e., men and women's biological capabilities) obscures the ways in which power dynamics function in sexual encounters.

When asked why she believes women's "organs" are more "complicated," Breeyan replied:

> Guys don't even know how a [woman's body] works. We have different areas where we trigger pleasure in our bodies and if they don't know where that is, they're just going to be having sex with someone that's just lying there. They're not going to know how to stimulate, and if you can't stimulate, I'm not going to feel anything. It's not gonna be pleasurable for me.

In line with the perspective that having orgasm is dependent on a partner's sexual skill (Armstrong et al. 2012), Breeyan's response underscores the dominant belief that women's orgasms are "tricky" and deliverable only by a skilled sexual partner (Jackson and Scott 2007). Breeyan does not critically examine the cultural conditions that disadvantage women in heterosexual sexual encounters, particularly the discouragement of women to pursue their own sexual pleasure (Wade et al. 2005).

One reason women's orgasms are believed to be harder to achieve is that women perceived them to take more time, than a men's orgasm, to produce. Jada, a thirty-four-year-old, engaged professional, described orgasm as significant to her conceptualization of pleasure. However, while experiencing an orgasm during the sexual interaction is important to her, she stated:

> I don't [have an orgasm] all the time, I will say that. He does all the time, but for me I will say it's every now and then. It is important 'cause I don't want to feel like, 'Dang, you got yours, and I sure didn't get mine.' But at the same time, I do want to please my man. I do want him to feel happy. So, sometimes I just want him to feel happy, and I'm ok with it. But other times it takes me a long time to get there [have an orgasm], so he has to hold off to make sure he doesn't have one, so that I do. But I realize how much time it takes, so I try not to make it [an orgasm] happen every time.

Jada, along with several other respondents, believed that their orgasm was not immediate, but rather time-consuming and labor-intensive for the partner. This belief shapes how Jada prioritizes her orgasm relative to her fiancé; she focuses on producing pleasure for him and relies on this activity to produce her (emotional) pleasure. Additionally, Jada's comment conveyed that she perceives her orgasm as a burden on her partner and consciously terminates the sexual interaction to spare him of this burden (she made no mention of whether her fiancé considers it labor-intensive on his end). Her belief that an orgasm "takes [her] a long time" and her actions to protect the partner from burden create the conditions for Jada to experience an orgasm inconsistently. Since her orgasms are inconsistent, she relies on her partner's "[happiness]" to feel sexual pleasure.

To Jada and other women in this group, women's orgasms were not a reliable outcome of the sexual interaction. This belief is in concert with the dominant construction of women's orgasm as elusive and not guaranteed in heterosexual sex, but rather constructed as a perk (Wade et al. 2005). When Sam explained the role of her orgasm during a sexual encounter, she stated, "I mean it's desired. I think that I'll be pleased either way." She elaborated that she "[knows] that [an orgasm's] not always achieved for a woman." Sam's response suggests a belief that women's orgasms are not as valued as men's, and women's pleasure is intimately connected with men's orgasm.

All but one woman in this group were either engaged or married. As Elliott and Umberson (2008) argue, gendered expectations are particularly salient in long-term heterosexual relationships that prescribe women manage and prioritize their partner's sexual pleasure to perform "marital bliss" and reduce any relationship tension. Therefore,

women who defined their partner's orgasm as a source of their own sexual pleasure do so as part of "performing desire" (Fahs 2011).

Prior research suggests that women's sexual pleasure is typically couched within ideals of intimacy or the "romantic trappings of love" (Jackson and Scott 2007: 12), and not in physical, embodied satisfaction (Schwartz and Young 2009; Spreecher 2002). Conventional understandings of sexual pleasure encourage women to center and prioritize their partner's pleasure in the sexual interaction. In other words, women defined sexual pleasure as predicated on the relational aspects of the sexual encounter (e.g., who the partner is, the type of relationship). Given that some women questioned their ability to have physical satisfaction (or an orgasm) in sexual interactions, they relied on the emotional connection of the interaction to contribute to their sexual pleasure. This provokes questions about whether women are subverting dominant, androcentric discourses that concentrate on producing an orgasm in sex, or whether women who deemphasize orgasm are adhering to traditional gender norms where women should consider emotional intimacy as sufficient for sexual pleasure and resign their physical satisfaction (Fahs 2011; Fahs and Plante 2017). While having an orgasm was indeed present in some of these women's descriptions of sexual pleasure, they prioritized the relationship over orgasm as a source of sexual pleasure.

### *Pleasure as Purpose*

The second theme indicated that women conceptualized sexual pleasure as a purpose, namely orgasm. A majority of respondents in the sample (n = 18) defined sexual pleasure this way. Women in this group described in detailed ways how sexual pleasure

is predominantly a physical sensation, using a woman's orgasm as the standard for a pleasurable experience. Molly, a twenty-two-year-old student currently dating, said, "Basically, if you make me orgasm, then you pleased me." Similarly, Yolanda, a forty-one-year-old, single professional said, "sexual satisfaction equates to having an orgasm." Ranisha, a twenty-five-year-old professional in a romantic relationship, described pleasure as "that ultimate climax. Good sex is meeting, getting your climax."

Ranisha added that certain conditions are conducive to achieving an orgasm such as "[being] in an enjoyable environment that you're comfortable with. I think [with] good sex you have to be comfortable. It can't be forced. It cannot be rushed." If these conditions are not met, she stated, "It's ok, I'll get it [orgasm] next time […] try a second round in thirty minutes." In a similar statement, Kaylah, an eighteen-year-old single student, characterized pleasure as having an orgasm coupled with the absence of feeling "ashamed." Kaylah mentioned feeling "completely comfortable […] and safe" as contributing to her pleasure. Here, comfort, consent – particularly respecting sexual boundaries – and time appear to be the conditions under which orgasm is possible for Kaylah and Ranisha.

For a few respondents, their conceptualization of sexual pleasure as orgasm was more nuanced. They argued that there must be equity in the sexual encounter or a mutually satisfying sexual experience. For example, Breeyan, a twenty-two-year-old student in a romantic relationship, expressed that she wanted to feel "satisfied" from sex, which to her meant, "feeling sexually fulfilled. 'Oh, that was fun.' I got pleasure from [sex] as well. That's basically it: getting pleasure." She later noted that she believes that

women's orgasms are "difficult" to achieve and men's orgasms are effortless. As a result, she has experienced "one-sided" sexual encounters in which her sexual partner had an orgasm but she did not. Therefore, for her, the definition of sexual pleasure also includes *who* has an orgasm; she must get pleasure, not just her partner.

Daniella, a twenty-sex-year-old, single student, defined pleasure as "lasting long, making sure that the women is receiving pleasure as much as the guy. Whether that's women ejaculating as much as the guy or just caressing her body more." When asked if an orgasm is important, she stated:

> I think so because I feel if I don't [have an orgasm], it would be no point in having sex. Because I mean, for me, the penetration part would be a little painful, and I look forward to having the orgasm. But if you can't do that [provide an orgasm], then there's really no point in having sex. 'Cause then I'm there just there to please you.

Daniella example illustrates how women may expect to have an orgasm to compensate for any pain they may experience during sex (Labuski 2015). Furthermore, she perceives that without an orgasm, the sexual encounter is not worthwhile. Daniella's response also reflects the "coital imperative," or the prioritization of penetrative sex as the way for both men and women to achieve an orgasm, despite evidence that a variety of other sexual activities are available to and may better produce orgasms for women (Armstrong et al. 2012; Frith 2013).

The narratives of women with this definition of sexual pleasure as orgasm were notable in that they featured language that described pleasure in physical terms or as embodied pleasure. They defined pleasure in terms of bodily sensations and women discussed the physical sensations that elicited pleasure. That the body figured

prominently in their responses interrupts the dominant discourses of women's sexuality as passive.

*Beliefs about sexual pleasure: reciprocity and equity*

Women in this group who characterized pleasure as purpose expected sexual encounters to be mutually satisfying or pleasurable. The "orgasm gap" that manifests in heterosexual sex possibly drives their expectation that their sexual encounters benefits both partners (Armstrong et al., 2012). Perhaps not surprisingly, women who characterized sexual pleasure as orgasm may be more attuned to this inequality in their sexual encounters. That women were concerned with (and demanded in some cases) an orgasm highlights their entitlement to sexual pleasure, consistent with other research on the importance of orgasm in women's lives (McClelland 2010). For example, Monique, a twenty-five-year-old student in a romantic relationship, captured this entitlement to orgasm, when she stated, "Women should feel just as satisfied as men. So equally, it's for two people, not just for one." Similarly, Kaylah also described past sexual partners who were "selfish" in terms of not caring about her orgasm and has readjusted her expectations. She explained her requirement of reciprocity in sexual pleasure:

> I don't want the guy to finish [have an orgasm], and he's all happy. And I'm, "Ok, I'm done?" You know? So [it's] definitely important for me to have an orgasm. Guys love to talk about, "I need to finish. I need to finish." And I feel like women, a lot of women, are sexually ashamed 'cause they feel, "I shouldn't [have an orgasm]." But, "don't be afraid to orgasm. Don't be afraid to climax during sex 'cause you need to be satisfied as well, just as much as the guy does."

Kaylah's concern that women are "afraid" to have an orgasm or do not recognize their right to sexual pleasure may reflect women's ambivalence about sexual enjoyment, given entrenched gender assumptions that orgasm matters less to women in a culture that

devalues women's sexual pleasure and polices women's sexual assertiveness in pursuing pleasure (Tiefer 1995). Yolanda shared a concern similar Kaylah's concern: "Guys think when they're done [with their orgasm], it's a wrap. Some guys get it. Some guys don't get it." Yolanda suggests that the sexual encounter "wraps up" when her sexual partner has an orgasm, thus effectively ending the sexual encounter, regardless if she experienced one. Sexualities scholars have documented that this "orgasm imperative" favors men as the male orgasm signals the conclusion of the sexual interaction (Jackson and Scott 1997).

However, some women resisted the "orgasm imperative." Deana, a twenty-four-year-old currently in the early of stages of dating, challenged this arrangement that benefits men. She described sexual pleasure as "climaxing," but said that if her orgasm is not part of "the calculation, we cannot talk." In other words, her orgasm is an essential part of the sexual interaction, and its absence would terminate the relationship in the early stages.

In these examples, women's expectation for pleasure equity in the sexual encounter disrupts the dominant cultural understanding that often treats women's orgasm as insignificant or "incidental" to women's sexual satisfaction (Wade et al. 2005). Women in this group expected orgasm reciprocity in the sexual interaction and in some cases, expressed feelings of entitlement to orgasm as a complete sexual interaction. The findings that women in this group defined sexual pleasure as an orgasm and expected pleasure reciprocity have several implications. First, women departed from the normative sexual script that considers women's sexual pleasure as stemming from relational factors

rather than physical sensations. Second, the emphasis on reciprocity in orgasm relies on the cultural assumption that men's orgasms in sexual interactions are prioritized and considered inevitable and expected, or perceived as a natural outcome of sex, whereas women's orgasms are constructed as a "bonus" (Jackson and Scott 1997; Nicolson and Burr 2003). As women defined sexual pleasure as orgasms, their orgasms become "observable products" that can be monitored, and in some cases, demanded for an equitable sexual interaction. These narratives, then, reflect the gendered power dynamics in (hetero)sexual interactions where women must negotiate for their sexual pleasure in the first place whereas men's orgasms are prioritized and taken as given. None of the women in this group suggested that "one-sided" sexual interactions stemmed from a woman, but not her partner, having an orgasm. Their responses underscore how men and women enter sexual interactions with unequal social power, namely the expectation of men's sexual pleasure. Therefore, women in this group expected to experience sexual pleasure equality through reciprocal orgasms.

### *Pleasure as a Process*

The third definition of sexual pleasure that emerged from the sample was sexual pleasure as a process. A small group of respondents (n = 6) worked through their conceptualization of sexual pleasure as they were answering the question. For the women in this group, sexual pleasure could include either orgasms or emotional connection or both, but neither of these were central to or necessary for sexual pleasure. Instead of focusing on orgasm or emotional factors to generate sexual pleasure like the previous

groups, these women described more abstract views on sexual pleasure. For example, Gabrielle, a divorced twenty-eight-year-old, defined sexual pleasure as:

> It's more than, I guess, an easy thing to pinpoint to [is an orgasm]. But not everyone can have an orgasm. Or you don't always have an orgasm with every sexual experience, but that doesn't make it unsatisfying or not pleasurable. It's feeling positive after a sexual experience.

Gabrielle reported that she was single and "ho-ing it up," or having sexual encounters with several partners (embracing the "jezebel" stereotype), indicating that for her, sexual pleasure was not tied to who the partner is, unlike the women who defined pleasure as emotional connection and emphasized the role of their partner in their responses. Instead, "feeling positive" about the sexual experience contributes to her sexual pleasure, regardless of whether she has an orgasm during the interaction. Chloe, a nineteen-year-old single student, shared Gabrielle's sentiments. When asked if orgasm is central to her conceptualization of sexual pleasure, she replied:

> No, it's not important for me to have an orgasm every time you have sex. No, it's not important, but it'd be cool to have one every time, but in reality, well, could you? I don't even know if you could have it every time. It'd be cool to have it every time. But if not, it's not something that I would ever be, "Oh my gosh, I didn't have one. This is the worst sex of my life."

Unlike in the case of the women who defined pleasure as orgasm, Gabrielle and Chloe's sexual pleasure did not rely on whether the sexual activity involved either orgasm or equity in orgasms. While an orgasm may be an aspiration or hope in the sexual interaction, it was not required for a satisfying interaction. In a related way, Jasmine, a thirty-nine-year-old married educator, minimized the importance of orgasm in her account. When asked how felt about a sexual interaction without an orgasm, she replied "I'm still enjoying [sex]. So, I'll go with what's happening." Therefore, while an orgasm

is regarded as a hopeful outcome, it did not predict whether or not they felt sexual pleasure.

In this group, women perceived sex as an experience that can be pleasurable in multiple ways: physical, emotional, or a combination of the two. What makes the sex pleasurable varies by person and is not attached to a "measurable" outcome such as an orgasm or the relationship with the partner. For example, Nia, an eighteen-year-old single student, defined sexual pleasure as:

> Whatever feels nice to you. For example, my friend was telling me about when she hooked up with this guy and they had sex, but she didn't cum and I was like, "Oh, that must've been unfortunate." She was like, "No, that's fine. I'm fine with it." So I guess if other people can be fine with it, I can be fine with it too. I just haven't been in that situation.

Nia contrasted her ideas of sexual pleasure with her friend's experience; yet she described having sexual interactions that consistently resulted in orgasms. However, her friend's perspective may have broadened her ideas of what can constitute sexual pleasure – that is, beyond the "orgasm imperative."

Ashanti, a twenty-six-year-old producer who is currently dating, described how her sexual pleasure is tied to her faith. She described how her "viewpoint is a little different" about sexual pleasure and how she views "sex [as] a very spiritual experience." She constructs her "body as a gift" to her partner. Therefore, for her, sexual pleasure is being vulnerable with someone, since it is "literally the closest you can be to any human being." Therefore, her definition relies on the context of the sexual interaction where she is able to feel not only comfortable with her sexual partner, but also perceives her partner is "worthy" of her body.

*Beliefs about sexual pleasure: beyond the physical/emotional binary*

Women who described pleasure as a process – that is, taking into account the broader sexual interaction, disrupted the physical and emotional pleasure binary. Here, sexual pleasure is identified as a combination of factors that could generate satisfying experiences. While the women were in the small minority who defined sexual pleasure in this way, it underscores how re-writing the sexual script – that is, not attaching sexual pleasure solely to either orgasm or emotional connection, may lead to sexually pleasurable experiences for some women. Compared to women in the first two groups, who defined sexual pleasure as pleasuring (emotional connection) or purpose (orgasm), women in this group unseat orgasm as the defining feature of sex. Instead, sexual pleasure can stem from multiple avenues, one of which can be physical pleasure.

## Discussion and Conclusion

These accounts indicated that sexual pleasure is complex, multi-faceted, and variable. While some women had difficulty formulating a response, potentially reflecting a gap in language that captures African-American women's sexual pleasure (Hammonds 2002), most respondents provided rich insight to how they constructed pleasure and the role (or lack thereof) of orgasm in their sexual encounter. Heeding Black feminist scholars' attentiveness to Black women's sexual subjectivity (Cruz 2016; Morgan 2015; Miller-Young 2014; Nash 2014; Patterson-Faye 2016), these findings disrupt the silence surrounding African-American women's sexual pleasure.

The findings were that women described sexual pleasure as pleasuring, purpose, or a process. Furthermore, their conceptualizations of sexual pleasure reflect dominant

cultural discourses around women's sexual pleasure that often treats women's sexual pleasure as insignificant or secondary to men's and women's bodies as essentially different from men's. The women did not conceptualize sexual pleasure as sexual domination or submission, engaging in more frequent sex, or engaging in "wild" sexual activities to invigorate their sexual lives and increase their pleasure (as often portrayed in the media). In fact, several respondents described "rough" sexual interactions as unpleasurable and unwanted. For example, Ranisha replied, "I don't want to be pushed around or made to do anything. Anything in life, especially something with my body. So, I need [my partner] to be gentle." Mainstream messages about sexual pleasure often advise women to "spice up" their sexual relationship and be responsible for retaining their partner's sexual interest. Instead, attention should be directed towards the larger structures that facilitate conditions for women to experience sexual pleasure. These findings contribute to moving the discussion of Black women's sexuality beyond the "risk" framework and instead, focusing on the everyday meanings attached to sexual pleasure in their own sexual lives.

Several limitations should be considered. First, research suggests that social class significantly shapes how women think about sexual pleasure and that marginalized women, in terms of class, experience less pleasurable sex (Fahs and Swank 2011). Some studies indicate that class is salient in predicting women's ideas about what constitutes sexual pleasure and sexual satisfaction. The majority of my participants were highly educated; thus, the findings may not capture the conceptualizations of women from varying socioeconomic statuses. Future studies should sample across class backgrounds

to provide greater insight to how cross-cutting social hierarchies complicate African-American women's conceptualizations of sexual pleasure. However, these findings make an important contribution to highlight Black women's sexual pleasure whereas prior literature frequently focuses on racially privileged groups (Hargons et al. 2018).

Second, I focused exclusively on women who identified as heterosexual. The sexualities literature complicates the mainstream belief that expressed sexual identity is coherent with same-sex sexual behavior(s) (Ward and Schneider 2009). This focus on heterosexuality obscures the ways in which non-heterosexual African-American women experience their sexuality and conceptualize sexual pleasure. My intent is not to privilege heterosexuality or invest in heteronormativity, but rather to understand how gendered power dynamics operate within heterosexual sexual relations (see Moore 2012 for discussion how gendered power dynamics operate within same-gender relationships). The next stage of research should be inclusive of how queer, lesbian, and non-heterosexual identified Black women conceptualize sexual pleasure who in addition to racism and sexism, contend with homophobia that heighten surveillance of Black LGBT communities (Cohen 1999). Examining how Black women across sexual orientations think about sexual pleasure would challenge heteronormativity and reimagine queer possibilities (Cohen 2004; Ferguson 2004; Holland 2004).

# CHAPTER 5

## Negotiating Racialized Sexual Stereotypes: Stigma Management and Accounts of Racialized Sexual Selves

In this chapter, I document how heterosexual Black women manage stigma based on racialized sexual stereotypes and how women's multiple marginalized statuses shape the presentation of their racialized sexual selves. I pursue the following research questions: How are heterosexual Black women racialized and sexualized? And correspondingly, how do heterosexual Black women cope with the stigma that distorts their sexuality? I propose that women manage stigma through employing two discursive strategies to distance themselves from deviant labels of Black women within U.S. culture. Women in the sample either minimized the salience of stereotypes in their sexual lives or acknowledged that the stereotypes shaped their presentation of sexuality and altered their sexual practices. In examining how Black women respond these stereotypes, I consider how the broader cultural narratives of Black women's sexuality filter down to women's discourses of sexual selves. Similar to Wilkins[1] (2012a, 2012b), my principal interests are not women's sexual practices or behaviors, but rather the *discourse* surrounding their sexual experiences and how women cope with such cultural beliefs. Examining how women manage these stereotypes also reveals the degree to which they present public racialized sexual selves in an interview setting (Montemurro 2018).

[1] Recent allegations about Amy Wilkins' sexual harassment and manipulation of students have surfaced in The Chronicle (2018). I find her behavior abhorrent and do not condone her abuse of power. My engagement with Wilkins' academic work is in no way support of her actions and I stand in solidarity with the survivors.

Pioneering scholarship has explored stereotypes around Black women's sexuality (Collins 2005; hooks 1992) and their manifestation in dating and romantic relationships (Bany, Robnett, and Feliciano 2014; Chito-Childs 2005; Feliciano, Robnett, and Komaie 2009; McClintock 2010; Yancey, 2009). This focus has predominantly explored Black women's exclusion within the heterosexual dating sphere and collectively argues that these stereotypes render Black women as undesirable and reduce their likelihood of interracial dating (Lin and Lindquist 2013). Compounding these stereotypes that portray Black women as undesirable romantic partners, Eurocentric ideas of beauty, which, by definition, exclude Black women, especially dark-skinned women, are privileged, further reducing the likelihood of dating (Craig 2002; Hunter 1998; Sims 2012).

Men's perceptions of Black women reveal only part of the narrative. Missing from the literature is how Black women interpret and react to these sexual (Evans and Dyson 2015). Black women's sexuality can be considered paradoxically both *hypervisible* in terms of cultural assumptions absorbed by U.S. popular culture (Chito-Childs 2009), yet relatively *invisible* in terms of coverage of their lived sexual experiences in empirical research (Hammonds 1997). Furthermore, distortions of Black women's sexuality have been wielded to justify discrimination, resulting in disproportionate rates of sexual violence (McGuffey 2013) and sexual health risks among Black women (Bowleg, Lucas, and Tschann 2004; Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett 2003; Strings 2015). Indeed, research that centers Black women's sexuality focused more on the "dangers" of sexuality (Vance 1984) than the ways that sexuality can be healthy, affirming, and pleasurable for Black women (Evans and Dyson 2015).

The purpose of this chapter is to empirically examine how Black women interpret racist stereotypes and how stereotypes shape their own sexual identity. My findings dispel the idea that sexual racism is disintegrating or that society has achieved a "post-racial" status (Bonilla-Silva 2004). By empirically analyzing the ways Black women talk about racialized sexual stereotypes, I provide a deeper understanding of how they construct their identity disassociated from Black sexual deviancy. These findings are significant given that stereotypes of Black women's sexuality often dictate public policies that fuel systematic harm against Black women (Gurusami 2018; Roberts 1997). Firmly grounded in the Black feminist scholarship, I echo other scholars who assert that centering Black women's viewpoint is crucial to reveal mechanisms of gendered racism that can potentially unfold in multiply marginalized populations (Collins 1990; Harnois and Ifatunji 2010; Wingfield 2007).

## Background Literature

### *Racialized Sexual Stereotypes*

While I introduced the origins of racialized sexual stereotypes in the prior chapter, I will briefly outline how Black women contend with negative, inaccurate stereotypes that characterize them as hypersexual and unfeminine (Collins 2005). These stereotypes are legacies of institutionalized slavery and colonialism that engendered sexual violence against enslaved Black women (Feagin 2001; Roberts 1997). White slave owners rationalized their sexual mistreatment of enslaved Blacks by generating a cultural myth that Black women were inherently sexually insatiable and therefore, "unrapeable" (Sharpe 2010). These racial myths preclude Black women from characteristics such as

"delicate" and "refined" that have been historically reserved for white women (Roberts 1997: 10). This created the enduring trope of the "jezebel," which has been re-imagined, recycled, and reinvented in later generations wherein Black women's bodies are treated as sexually "accessible" (Davis 1983: 175). This ideological process is what Omi and Winant (1994) describe as "racial formation" wherein false perceptions of a group are transmitted in society. These stereotypes dehumanized Black women to justify the commodification, enslavement, and routine sexual exploitation of Black women's bodies (Miller-Young 2010). After the dismantling of institutionalized slavery, the stereotypes persisted, thus continuing to harm Black women by denying them autonomy and instilling racialized social control over their bodies (McGuffey 2013). To this day, Black women remain situated in a subordinate position in racial, gender, and class hierarchies (Collins 1990) and these stereotypes "make it impossible for Black women to occupy an 'ordinary,' namely, unmarked, social position" (Wilkins 2012b: 175).

Contemporarily, the stereotypes of Black women's sexuality involve the idea of excess – that is, a surplus of sensuality, dominance, and assertiveness that is non-normative and fetishized by broader society (Miller-Young 2010, 2014). Black women's "excess" sexuality makes them less desirable as romantic partners. White women's sexuality, in contrast, is constructed as ideal and normal and is free of negative stereotypes (Pyke and Johnson 2003). The construction of white sexuality as non-racialized (and to a degree *invisible* in society) (Lipsitz 1998) works to secure racial privilege for white women in the dating market (Joyner and Kao 2005; Lin and Lundquist 2013) while simultaneously coding Black women as *raced* and inferior sexual subjects

(hooks 2000). In other words, the devaluation of Black sexuality relies on celebrating white sexuality as the "norm" and flattens Black women to one-dimensional understandings of sexual deviance (Collins 2005).

Cultural representations of Black women's sexuality are incongruent with their lived sexual experiences (Collins 2005). For example, stereotypes of the hypersexual "jezebel" (stemming from slavery) would, if true, suggest that Black women enjoy having sex (Stephen and Phillips 2003). Yet, empirical research documents that Black women, relative to other racial groups of women, experience less satisfying sexual encounters, less sexual imagination, and more unwanted sexual experiences (Gonzales and Rolison 2005). The disconnect between cultural representations and Black women's actual sexual experiences has far-reaching consequences for Black women's sexual autonomy.

Racialized sexual stereotypes, then, function as type of stigma that Black women contend with in their daily lives. Stigma refers to a "deeply discrediting" attribute that prevents individuals from social inclusion (Goffman 1963: 3). The process goes as follows: once someone receives the label, the negative characteristic becomes absorbed into their identity and produces negative outcomes for individuals. This creates intense feelings of confusion and worthlessness, resulting in status loss for stigmatized groups (Link and Phelan 2001; Williams, Neighbors, and Jackson 2008). Link and Phelan (2001) argue that stigma, as opposed to research on discrimination, pivots attention to the "recipient," not producers, of stigma (p. 366). Since Goffman's seminal work, research on stigma have identified populations that encounter severe stigma such as sex workers

(Oselin 2018), mentally ill patients (Thoits 2011; Thoits and Link 2016), homeless persons (Casey and Reeve 2008; Phelan, Link, Moore, and Stueve 1997; Robinson 2018), and formerly incarcerated people (Gurusami 2018). These studies address how stigmatized groups interpret, internalize, reject, and/or challenge their devalued status.

More recently, scholarship on stigma and racism overlap to examine how racially marginalized groups mediate stigma, which vary considerably (Fleming, Lamont, and Welburn 2012; Lamont 2009). One such strategy includes "defensive othering" that reinforces *within-group* hierarchies to create distance between real or "imagined" others (Schwalbe, Holden, and Schrock 2000). This scholarship highlights how racially marginalized groups "other" co-ethnics in order to differentiate themselves and increase their status (Guenther, Pendaz, and Makene 2011; Pyke 2013). Racially marginalized groups can come to believe "sincere fictions" (Feagin and Vera 1995) about their own racial groups, or internalize racism, perpetuated in mainstream society that are often used to rationalize racial inequality (Osajima 1993). As Bonilla-Silva (2004) suggests, despite the inaccuracy of such stereotypes, racially marginalized groups are still susceptible to these widespread beliefs. For example, economically marginalized young Black and Latina women draw on dominant risk narratives that construct women of color as sexually irresponsible and craft an "identity of distance" that consists of empowerment and sexual self-respect (Ray 2018). Yet, social actors who practice "defensive othering" undermine collective efforts to combat racial discrimination. Other strategies encompass deflecting stigma onto racially dominant groups (Espiritu 2001; García 2012; Wilkins 2012b). This process involves women of color casting white "American" women as

lacking sexual restraint as means to assert moral superiority given their subordination within a racially stratified system. In both strategies, othering creates "symbolic boundaries" to claim new identities (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996) and in this case, recuperate a (racially) stigmatized status.

More recently, the rise in the "hook up" culture have increased sociologists' interests in understanding how sexual stigma operates on college campuses (Allison and Risman 2014; Bogle 2008; Armstrong, England, and Fogarty 2012). For example, college women's success at resisting the sexual stigma (or the "slut label") was largely linked to class background (Armstrong, Hamilton, Armstrong, and Seeley 2014). Women from affluent backgrounds experienced more freedom to sexually experiment (and therefore, evade the stigma), while less-affluent women experienced the "slut label" as sticky which jeopardized their reputation (Armstrong et al. 2014). Therefore, Armstrong and authors (2014) describe "sexual privilege" as the ability to take advantage of sexual opportunities (i.e., "hook ups" or casual, non-committed sexual activity) without negative consequences. However, racism dilutes "sexual privilege" that casts racially marginalized groups as less sexually desirable (Collins 2005; Nagel 2003) and heightens the risks for engaging in "hook ups." For example, racialized marginalized students experience greater surveillance of sexual behaviors (Joyner and Kao 2005; Ray and Rosow 2009), less frequent participation in the "hook up" culture relative to white peers (McClintock 2010), and hyper-visibility of interracial relationships (Wilkins 2012a, 2012b). For members of a racially marginalized group, then, sexual behavior outside a committed relationship potentially risks cementing cultural beliefs of hypersexuality. While research has

examined sexual stigma on college campuses (Armstrong et al. 2014; Ray and Rosow 2009; Wilkins 2012a, 2012b), this chapter diverges significantly by examining how the stigma of Black women's sexuality transcends the context of the university with an age- and educated-diverse sample.

Given the saturation of these stereotypes in U.S. popular culture (Collins 2005), Black women may internalize and believe them (Osajima 1993; Stephens and Phillips 2003). There is evidence that Black women feel conflicted about expressing their sexuality (specifically, their interest in sex) because they do not want to reinforce the stereotypes (hooks 1981; Hammonds 1997). They feel reluctant to express their sexuality "without it being constructed as risky, oppressive, dysfunctional, disease ridden, and unhealthy" (Evans and Dyson 2015: 30). In other words, while women across racial lines are discouraged from seeking sexual pleasure, particularly in "hook up" contexts (Armstrong et al. 2012), Black women face even greater social repercussions for expressing their sexuality, due to institutionalized racism. Therefore, Black women who seek sexual pleasure risk reifying deep-seated stereotypes that characterize Black women as sexually immoral.

In fact, there is a dearth of positive cultural stereotypes about Black women. There are no stereotypes in which they are presented as sexually agentic, despite long-standing assumptions of Black women's "natural" independence and assertiveness (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2007). One positive representation within the Black community is that of Black women as "queens" and "princesses" who exhibit sensuality and freedom to express their sexual desires (Evans and Dyson 2015). This image is particularly

empowering to Black women given their routine devaluation in society at large (McGuffey 2013). It supports a pivot from negative to positive Black womanhood and as such, opens a space for positive depictions of Black women's sexuality. Such a pivot is necessary for rearticulating the narrative of Black women that Collins (1990) proposed in Black Feminist Thought. By explicitly discussing sexuality in a positive framework, women treat their sexuality as important and, in turn, they may even feel entitled to sexual satisfaction (Montemurro, Bartasavich, and Wintermute 2015: 142). However, structural inequalities prevent Black women from expressing their sexuality without social repercussions.

Acknowledging the existence of negative sexual stereotypes is insufficient. We must also examine the lived experiences of Black women and how stereotypes unfold in women's sexuality and their reactions to these stereotypes. In other words, how do Black women make sense of these stereotypes and in what ways do they internalize, challenge, and/or minimize them? I argue that Black women engage in stigma management by either (1) rejecting or minimizing the salience of stereotypes in shaping their sexuality or (2) confronting the stereotypes and attempting to redefine the narrative around Black women's sexuality through emphasizing sex within romantic relationships. In both strategies, women actively challenge the negative cultural assumptions of Black women's sexuality. But in the latter, as they recraft an identity that challenges hypersexuality hinging on racist underpinnings, they reinforce gendered arrangements that expect women to engage in relationship sex.

## Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I leverage intersectionality theory to highlight Black women's unique sexual dilemma – that is, how can Black women be sexual or enjoy sex without being stigmatized? Prior to intersectionality theory, scholars were forced to inaccurately compartmentalize Black women's experiences under racism *or* sexism (Crenshaw 1991). Yet, intersectionality repairs these theoretical shortcomings and takes into account the myriad of social identities that individuals occupy, better clarifying the contours of inequality (Collins 1990; Crenshaw 1991; Lorde 1984). This pioneering theory illuminates how gendered racism affects those that are positioned at the intersections of multiple oppressions (Vidal-Ortiz, Robinson, and Khan 2018). I extend previous scholarship by considering how Black women interpret and react to stereotypes of Black women's sexuality.

Black feminist scholars have documented how Black women (and men) navigate these racialized sexual stereotypes in their everyday lives. For Black communities, the "politics of respectability" is a culturally-specific stigma management to shield from racial discrimination (Higginbotham 1993; Moore 2011; White 2001). It encourages Black women to participate in white, middle-class, (hetero)sexual norms, or act sexually chaste, in their public lives to theoretically avoid racial and gender discrimination (Cohen 1997). However, this strategy requires Black women to express their sexuality not necessarily as their desire, but in ways that avoid confirming racist stereotypes of Black women. Furthermore, attachment to "respectability politics" (i.e., middle-class sexual

norms) may challenge their racial "authenticity" and potentially create identity tensions due to incongruent gendered, raced, and classed expectations (Wilkins 2012a).

Black feminist scholars have critiqued "respectability politics" because they require Black women to alter their "physical presentation and personal decorum" to achieve racial and gender equity (Johnson 2013: 891). This burden on Black women results in further policing rather than a liberation of Black women's sexuality and reproductive justice (Hammonds 1997; Roberts 1997). In this chapter, I consider how Black women mobilize stigma management and whether it is an effective resource for them to cope with stereotypes of Black women's sexuality.

## Analysis

In this chapter, I queried participants about the stereotypes of Black women's sexuality circulating in their social world. Specifically, I asked: "What stereotypes have you heard about Black women's sexuality?" I followed up with: "Have these stereotypes affected you in any way?" I specifically probed their responses to unveil how these stereotypes influenced their own ideas about sexuality. While many participants provided ready answers to these questions, some seemed to find the questions to be difficult to answer. For example, several women paused after the question and took time before responding. A handful of women asked me to re-word the question before answering. In those cases I typically restated the questions as: "Are there any false beliefs about Black women's sexuality that you are aware of?" Additionally, some participants expressed difficulty in answering the second part of the question, "How do these stereotypes affect you?" I interpreted the women's uncertainty as hesitation to talk openly about the effects

of race and sexuality given American society's general framing of these two topics as taboo (Montemurro 2018). However, after some probing, all respondents answered the questions, with many respondents offering explicit and detailed remarks about how Black women's sexuality is constructed in society. I protect the identities of my participants by assigning pseudonyms and altering potentially identifying information. However, I do share their relationship status and age as contextual factors for interpreting the responses.

## Findings

Despite (inaccurate) claims by some that America is now a "post-racial" society (Bonilla-Silva 2004), this chapter reveals how race is alive and well: sexuality is embedded within a larger racialized system that portrays Black women as the racialized "Other" to mark sexual boundaries (Nagel 2003). My respondents' narratives are riddled with deeply racialized and gendered stereotypes that frame Black women as sexually deviant. I present my results in two separate, yet related sections. First, I describe the stereotypes that respondents said made up public perceptions of Black women's sexuality – stigma that the women confront in their everyday lives. Secondly, I analyze respondents' reactions to these stereotypes, or how they manage the stigma of Black sexual deviancy.

### *Part One: Racialized Sexual Stereotypes*

#### *The Jezebel Revisited: Black women as oversexed and exotic*

When asked to explicitly discuss stereotypes of Black women's sexuality, many respondents acknowledged the prevailing stereotypes of Black women as "[sexual] freaks," "fast," and "promiscuous." These labels characterize Black women as sexually

aggressive, wild, and/or possessing insatiable sexual desires. This hypersexuality was deployed in various ways and was omnipresent. These stereotypes were repeated by respondents' family members and peers, via social media, and throughout their social networks. For many respondents, I sensed frustration and disappointment with and anger about how Black women's sexuality is characterized in society.

The women described the stereotype of hypersexuality to be pervasive in mainstream society. Anya, a thirty-nine year old professional, stated "[society] considers [Black women] just openly sexual to anybody and everybody. Doesn't matter what size or shape they are. They are willing to have sex with everybody." Anya's response reflects the idea that Black women are sexually insatiable and always willing to have sex. Similarly, Jasmine, a thirty-nine year old educator, discussed the "freak, hoes, baby mamas" labels as Black women who are "just up for anything [sexually], down for anything [sexually]." Here, Anya and Jasmine define hypersexuality as non-discriminating sexual actors (i.e., "have sex with *everybody*") or sexual act (i.e., "up for anything").

Several respondents (n = 3) described stereotypes of Black women's "sexual aggression." As Molly (introduced in Chapter 4) said, Black women are stereotyped to "have multiple sexual partners or have sex a lot of times." The implication of her response is that "aggression" can mean either having multiple sexual partners or high quantities of sexual encounters. While women described various sources that deployed the hypersexuality stereotype, their responses suggested that Black women are reduced to this one characteristic.

Some respondents, such as Breeyan (introduced in Chapter 4) and Sanaa (a twenty-two year-old college student), described stereotypes that dehumanize Black women or question their very humanity. For example, Breeyan said, "Black women are supposed to be over-sexual, almost sexually deviant. We're supposed to be *scientifically* the most sexual beings on the planet because Black people are primitive, ape-like, and only interested in reproduction or getting sexual pleasure." She links the origins of the stereotype to when white slave owners enslaved Blacks "because if they're [Blacks] overly sexual, they want it from anybody, it doesn't matter who it is. That's all they wanted is just to be sexually used." Sanaa evoked this racist historical trope in her description of the stereotype that equated Black women with animals such as "monkeys and gorillas." The construction of Black women as "primitive" (hooks 2000) distinctly characterizes Black women as animalistic and inferior, denying women's humanity.

Some women described a stereotype in which Black women are "exotic." The term "exotic" has historically been wedded to Black women and while on the surface appears as complimentary, it suggests racial inferiority (Waring 2013: 300). Characterizing Black women as sexually "exotic" (Essed 1991) minimizes women's sexual agency and constructs them as valued only for their sexuality. For example, Tamia, a twenty-one year old student, stated about Black women, "I feel like they're fetishized. I feel like that's a thing for sure. Their skin and anything else about them is pretty much fetishized by the other races." When asked what she meant by fetishized, she replied, "[they're] seen as not conventional. It's a bigger turn on because it's not the *norm*" (emphasis added). In this case, the routine fetishizing of Black women relies on

the construction of white sexuality as normative, unraced, and bland (hooks 1992; Miller-Young 2014). That is, Black women are presumed to offer "spice" or racial difference to a sexual encounter that will heighten its excitement (hooks 1992: Waring 2013).

Nagel (2000) asserts that racialization mapped onto body types, such as curvy and larger bodies, serves to essentialize race as a biological marker. Some respondents (n = 10) called attention to how racialized physical traits are imbued with sexualized assumptions. Respondents discussed that hypersexuality was often linked to racialized notions of Black women's bodies, such as "big ol' booty" or "fat asses." The association of Black women's sexuality with racialized physical characteristics operates as a means of objectification, i.e., treating women as physical body parts and dehumanizing women as a result (Babbitt 2013; Collins 2005). Black women's racialized and gendered bodies, then, become evidence to prove the stereotype of hypersexuality. For instance, Gabrielle (introduced in Chapter 4) said, "With Black women, [the stereotypes are] very much coded in this sort of hypersexuality. So, it's not just you're a slut. You sleep with a lot of men. It's like 'video hoes.' So, you're showing your ass all the time. Or maybe you're a stripper, or other stuff that has racialized undertones." Gabrielle makes the racialized (and classed-based) distinction that while women across racial groups risk experiencing the "slut" stigma (Armstrong et al. 2014; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009), this stigma is particularly severe for Black women who are conflated with rap video "vixens" and sex workers (Wingfield and Mills 2012). She explained how these stereotypes of hypersexuality often provoked questions from other people about her lack of children. She said that people were consistently "surprised" that she didn't have children, given her

age of twenty-eight. She said that this stereotype carries "a lot of assumptions around being really sexually active or hypersexual, or resulting in children, or multiple children, or multiple fathers." Gabrielle's response highlights the dominant classed-based stereotype of the "welfare queen" which paints Black women as being hypersexual and having multiple children who rely on and profit from government assistance (Stephen and Phillips 2003). The "welfare queen" stereotype has prevented many Black women from receiving social welfare as they are considered not deserving public assistance for their families (Roberts 1997).

Nia (introduced in Chapter 4) described the stereotype as "all Black women could shake their ass like there's no tomorrow. They're flexible. And on the contrary, I'm really not flexible at all. That their wigs will fall off. Like, 'Sex so good, her wig is gonna fall off. She'll sweat out her weave.'" When probed as what she meant by "flexible," she elaborated that Black women are presumed to have the ability to "do different [sexual] positions." Nia uses her own inflexibility to distance herself from other Black women and to debunk the stereotype of Black women's exceptional sexual abilities. Aisha, an eighteen-year old student, stated, "People think like we're [Black women] willing to just have sex with anybody. And that we don't value our bodies." When asked what she means by "value," she responded, "just because you look a certain way, just because you have bigger thighs or a bigger butt, that means that you're more likely to have more sex than the next person." Aisha emphasized the racialized features most associated with Black women and how the presumption of hypersexuality is connected to certain "curvier" body parts.

Sade (introduced in Chapter 4) described the notion that Black women do not "value" their bodies and, thus, are presumed to be more sexually available. She explained:

> If [Black women] wear something that might be revealing, it's because we don't have any self-respect, as opposed to maybe that's just what I like to do. Why is (it) that if I wear something revealing, it's because I don't respect myself, cause I'm looking for [sexual] attention.

Sade described being stigmatized for wearing "short shorts" and being perceived as intentionally inviting sexual attention or possessing an "underlying motive" (i.e., sex) for her clothing choice:

> Just because you have bigger thighs or [a] bigger butt that means you're likely to have more sex than the next person […] I feel like there's this thing of associating just this curviness or, I guess, being voluptuous as more sexually active and that just has a lot to do with like the sexualization of women's bodies in general. But, I just feel Black women's bodies are more hypersexualized overall.

This response echoes Schooler's (2008) assertion that voluptuous bodies (literally) carry entrenched racial assumptions. Even still, African-American women who have "smaller" bodies are also vulnerable to sexualization. Patterson-Faye (2016: 929) indicates that regardless of size, Black women's bodies "[send] sexual messages to society members who decode these movements into sexual and non-sexual behavior." For Black women, then, their bodies cannot escape the sexualization process regardless of what size they inhabit and elicit unwanted sexual attention.

Another example is provided by Sanaa, who described a social event in which she garnered unwanted sexual attention due to her body shape. She detailed how other people made assumptions about her sexuality based on her physical appearance:

> I'll even wear outfits that I have already and they'll be like form fitting. And she'll [her mother] tell me those are more for thinner people because it looks better on thinner people. I guess also she's concerned because I do have more curves, I'm going to attract the wrong kind of attention from males. So I think she doesn't like that as well. 'Cause my sister is older than me, but she's also smaller than me so when she wears something like a crop top or shorts, it doesn't look as provocative versus when I wear it.

The conclusions about a Black woman's sexuality coincide with stereotypical assumptions of Black women's body as voluptuous (Schooler 2008; Strings 2015). For Sanaa, who is "curvy," she is perceived as hypersexual and "provocative" if she wears revealing clothes. She contrasts with her sister, who is not curvy and, in turn, is not as readily hypersexuality. While Sanaa doesn't believe her clothes are inappropriate, her mother routinely monitors her choices due to her body size, but not her sister's choices. By policing what her daughter wears, her mother reinforces the idea that Black women bear the responsibility for men's attention and should alter their physical appearance to prevent it. This reflects the historical legacy that precludes notions of sexual innocence for Black women (Collins 2005).

Daniella (introduced in Chapter 4) connected the hypersexual stereotype to Black women's bodies. She stated, "You always have that auntie who's like, 'your hips look wider; I hope you're not having sex.'" Her aunt's question implies that sexual activity brings physical changes to the body and having "wider" hips is proof that Daniella has engaged in sex and may be pregnant as a result. When asked how she responded to this comment, Daniella indicated that her aunt's question was rhetorical, the presumed answer being "no." Yet, even if her aunt anticipates a "no" response to her own question, she still asks Daniella which indicates some degree of policing her niece's body. With Sanaa and

Daniella's responses, Black women are stereotyped to have "naturally" larger bodies (Hill, 2009) and therefore, hypersexuality is inscribed onto Black women's (racialized) bodies.

In addition to body size and shape as a marker for racialized sexual stereotypes, Breeyan (introduced in Chapter 4) also mentioned how skin color is also coded as hypersexual. Skin color is a physical feature most visible to on-lookers.

> That's inaccurate to assume a people of any culture is a certain way because of their skin color. The fact that skin color even leads to sexual activity makes no sense. Because sexual activity isn't determined by race or anything like that. But the over-sexuality, I think is more attributed to Black people, *Black women*.

Here, Breeyan critiques how these stereotypes stem from the inaccurate idea that race is a predictor of sexual behavior especially for women of color (Somerville 2000).

*The Mammy Revisited: Black women as prude and undesirable*

A handful of respondents (n = 6) described stereotypes of Black women as prude or asexual. Although they run counter to the stereotype of hypersexuality, these descriptions recall another historical stereotype: that of the Mammy, a Black woman, often depicted as dark-skinned and large, who is asexual and masculine (Collins 2005). During slavery, some Black enslaved women served as the housemaid, tending to the house and children of white slave owners. As slave owners needed to justify enslaved Black women's proximity to and substantial influence on the white family, they stripped Black women of their sexuality and rendered them sexually undesirable (Morgan 2004; Patterson-Faye 2016). Therefore, the Mammy stereotype thus served to justify this form of Black women's labor exploitation while desexualizing Black women (Roberts 1997).

In the stereotype of Black women as prude, Black women "don't do crazy stuff" or "they don't want to try new things." For instance, Daniella described images of Black women endorsed by Black men: "A lot of times Black men would want a threesome, and they would be, 'Black women don't do that [a threesome]. They don't like women,' or 'they would never be with a woman.'" Thus, according to the stereotype, unless Black women are open to any or all sexual behavior (and willing to engage in same-sex sexual experiences), they are prude. In this comment, women's sexual comfort is considered inconsequential to the sexual desires of Black men. Being interested in some but not other types of sex undermines Black women's sexual desirability.

In addition to this stereotype that Black women were prude, respondents also described specific sexual acts that Black women are presumed to avoid in sexual encounters. Yolanda (introduced in Chapter 4) explained, "Black women don't like to have sex in multiple positions and they're prudes in the bedrooms. They don't want to experiment [sexually]." Yolanda's response suggests that a component of desirability would include being open to engage in sexual acts otherwise not part of someone's sexual repertoire. Yet, from these responses, experimentation is racially coded as part of white women's sexual repertoire. Similarly, Sam (introduced in Chapter 4) expressed a stereotype of Black women as unwilling to cater to Black men's sexual desires:

> "Black women don't wanna do this," or "Black women don't wanna do that," in terms of they don't let their men in control [in the sexual encounter], how the position should go, or how you should have sex. Or, they don't submit to the man being *superior* in terms of sex. I hear a lot of Black men saying that Black women don't like to give oral sex. (emphasis added)

Women, such as Sam, who discussed stereotypes of Black women as prude also invoked white women's sexuality in their responses. Racialized sexual stereotypes by design perpetuate ideologies of white "normalcy" and celebrate whiteness (Collins 2005; Greene 2000), particularly in a so-called "colorblind" society (Bonilla-Silva 2006). Sam heard these stereotypes in her community and on social media. In the case of the latter, she frequently viewed social media posts, such as on Facebook, that had comments about Black women. For example, she explained common posts shared by Black men on social media such as: "That's what's wrong with Black women today. They don't want to submit to their men. And that's why I'm gonna get a *white woman*." This statement was particularly painful to Sam who shared that her previous relationship ended due to infidelity that involved a white woman with her Black partner. According to these posts, they stigmatize Black women as too dominant or independent in relationships, indicating Black women's "failed" femininity (Collins 2005). This reflects the "strong women/weak men" thesis that presents Black couples as deviating from Eurocentric ideals of masculinity and femininity since Black women "[spoil] intimacy by failing to be submissive and depriving men of the dominance they deserve" (Hill 2005: 95). Yet, these gendered expectations that demand Black women "submit" to Black men conflict with the realities of Black women's lives who have historically participated in the labor force and gained economic independence (Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003). On the other hand, white women's presumed submissiveness enhances their sexual desirability and fuels Black men's racial motivations to pursue interracial sexual relationships. As Armstrong and authors (2014) argue, women with greater (classed and raced) status occupy "sexual

privilege" that allows them to maintain a sexually "moral" reputation while participating in the "hook up" culture.

Mycah, a twenty-one year old eligibility worker, discussed the polarized constructions of Black women as either "lazy, we don't please our men" or "we're all whores, never nothing in the middle." As Collins (1990) notes, contradictory constructions (i.e., in this example – Black women as both asexual and hypersexual) work to render them as deviant and, in contrast, white women as "normal." Similar to Daniella and Sam, Mycah argued that Black men's sexual preference for white women relies on the stereotype that Black women universally do not engage in particular sexual acts: "Whether it be oral, whether it be threesomes, whether it be whatever, Black women are not that open to it." Black women are "put up against white women," suggesting that white women are universally willing to engage in those sexual acts. Tamia also remarked that Black men in her life routinely state that "white girls give good [oral sex]," thus motivating their desire to have sexual relationships with white women instead of Black women. Rhianna, a twenty year-old student, reported hearing statements by men such as "sex with white girls is so much better." Cultural assumptions that white women can offer a better sexual experience with an unlimited menu of sexual acts indeed inform and shape Black men's preference for white women; yet, these conditions demote Black women, framing them as sexually undesirable partners.

The prevalence of interracial relationships between Black men and white women is well-documented in empirical research (Chambers and Kravitz 2011; Crowder and Tolnay 2000; Raley 1996; Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan 1990; Yancey 2009). Past studies

find that some Black men have internalized the stereotype of Black women as sexually undesirable, thus generating greater rates of out-marriage between Black men and white women (Bany et al. 2014; Chito-Childs 2005; Dalmage 2000; Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan 1990). Therefore, to make sense of their devalued status, Black women pin hypersexuality on white women in order to increase their status (Espiritu 2001; Wilkins 2012b). Yet, Black men's choices come at the social expense of Black women who are severely disadvantaged across the dating and marriage continuum (Childs 2005). With the above responses, Black women were aware of interracial sexual relationships between Black men and white women as carrying symbolic weight -- that is, the rejection of Black women (Dalmage 2000; Wilkins 2012b).

*Part Two*

*"It Doesn't Affect Me": Accounts of Rejection and Minimization*

In the previous section, I described the racialized sexual stereotypes of Black women that circulate in respondents' social networks and broader society. While conveying contradictory expectations about Black women's sexuality, both the hypersexual and asexual stereotype serve to construct Black women as sexually non-normative. In this section, I highlight how respondents cope with stigma mentioned in the previous section. I find that respondents engaged in one of two stigma management strategies: 1) rejection or minimization of stereotypes or 2) acknowledgment, disavowal, and resistance of stereotypes. In both strategies, respondents reconcile stigma by presenting an identity that immunizes them from negative portrayals of Black women's

sexuality and transforms the dominant assumptions of Black sexual deviancy (Espiritu 2001; García 2012; Montemurro 2018; Ray 2018).

About half of the respondents (n = 12) reported that the stereotypes did not directly influence their sexuality or sexual behaviors. Common responses to this question were "it doesn't affect me," "they're silly," or that these stereotypes had little to no impact on their sexuality. While respondents in this group suggested that these stereotypes did not shape their sexuality, upon reflection, they described how and why they felt shielded from these stereotypes. They commonly reported that their upbringing or "environment" provided a buffer that protected them from stereotypes infiltrating their sexual lives.

Monique (introduced in Chapter 4) started discussing how she holds herself "to a certain standard," and therefore, these stereotypes have not influenced her sexual practices. She grew up in a predominantly White suburban community and felt somewhat shielded from negative stereotypes of Black women. While she didn't directly "hear" stereotypes from other people, she did routinely "see" them online in social media outlets which are accessible to anyone regardless of their residence. However, after moving to a diverse, metropolitan area for college, she started to witness the stereotypes that many other respondents reported. When she attended social gatherings, she said:

> I hear [Black men] talking, hearing things like that. I mean [I've] never been in that category ["fast"], but I hear how they talk about other Black women. I just assume that's how you feel about most of them. The women are fast or promiscuous, or she's "ratchet" - the little lingo that they have these days. They just look down on each other.

First, Monique's response reflects a degree of internalizing the ideology of Black women as hypersexual: she distances herself from "fast" or promiscuous girls and assures that she doesn't not "fall into a category like that" (Jones 2009). Research has shown that people in socially marginalized positions often employ an "identity of distance" to assert greater sexual subjectivity and improve their social status (Ray 2018; Schwalbe and Schrock 1996). Yet, by constructing herself as not in that "category," she symbolically outlines the boundaries of what constitutes "respectable" Black women and avoids inclusion by marginalizing "fast" women.

When asked to elaborate on her statement that Black men and women "look down on each other," Monique described an interaction in which she'd overheard Black men state, "these [Black] girls…all they do is sleep around with these men." According to her, Black men believe the stereotype of Black women's promiscuity and participate in perpetuating the stereotype of Black women. This passage attests to how members of a racial group can internalize messages or "sincere fictions" about their own racial group and in turn, reproduce inequalities (Essed 1991; Feagin 2000). Nina, introduced in Chapter 4, also shared that she is often in groups with predominantly Black men who inquire about these stereotypes in her presence. Often, these men would ask her to speak on behalf of all Black women and explain the cultural assumptions about them. She stated:

> I just tell them I don't know [Black] women like that. Not every woman talks about her [sexuality] and the things that they're doing sexually. The women that I do talk to, most of them don't fit that description.

Nina's response suggests that some Black men have internalized the dominant assumptions of Black women of hypersexual and vocal about their sexual experiences, and forces Nina to dispel the stereotype. Monique and Nina's responses reflect the common characterization of relationships between Black men and women as antagonistic, problematic, and laden with strife (Anderson 2000; Chito-Childs 2005; Collins 2005). Therefore, Black men's belief in the stereotypes may encourage them to seek interracial romantic or sexual relationships rather than such relationships with Black women (Wilder and Cain 2010; Wilkins 2012a).

Anya stated how her family socialization was a stronger predictor to her presentation of sexuality than the hypersexual stereotypes that circulated her social networks. When asked as to why she perceives the stereotype as insignificant to her sexuality, she stated, "I think that has a lot to do with how I was raised. I don't feel I was raised to just have sex with anybody and everybody. I really don't judge people anyway. I feel like your sexual life has to do with *you* and *your personal expression*" (emphasis added). Anya described that one's sexuality is not shaped by raced and gendered expectations, but rather is predominantly explained by someone's individual disposition. Similarly, Charlene, introduced in Chapter 4, stated that "I'm such an individual where I do things how I like to do things. I don't let other people's views affect how I do things. I feel *we're all individuals* and *I'm me*" (emphasis added). Echoing Charlene's beliefs, Sanaa shared that these stereotypes have no impact on her sexuality because chooses sexual partners that have not internalized the stereotypes of Black women. When asked if these stereotypes have affected her, she stated, "No, I just honestly focus on me and what

I'm doing. I mean that's just what they think. They're never going to know how I am because I'm not going to do that [have sex] with them. It doesn't really affect me, how I feel, or how I have sex." Anya, Charlene, and Sanaa minimized the significance of racialized sexual stereotypes in their own construction of sexual lives. Yet, by emphasizing that only individual characteristics determine sexual practices or behaviors, these respondents ignored how race and gender profoundly shape expectations of Black women's sexuality, especially the sexual expectation that Black women are sexually promiscuous. By minimizing the impact of these stereotypes in their lives, their responses are consistent with the logics of colorblindness and emphasizing "individualism."

In a "colorblind" society (Bonilla-Silva 2004), marginalized groups are not encouraged to reflect on how racism shapes their daily lives and particularly, their sexual lives that are often treated as a deeply personal and intimate matter (Bedi 2015). That is, a "colorblind" society sets the conditions to deny the salience of race even among racially marginalized groups. Therefore, this partially explains why some women may be able to identify the stereotypes of Black women in the previous section, yet view racial and gender inequality as not undermining their sexuality. By downplaying the stereotypes of Black women as directly informing their sexuality, women in this group disassociated negative beliefs of Black womanhood in a culture that has historically and unjustly sexually shamed Black women (Lorde 1984). This is particularly salient given the dearth of positive cultural narratives of Black womanhood in mainstream society that women can identify with and embody (Collins 2005; Evans and Dyson 2016). Montemurro (2018) suggests that by "de-centering" race in Black women's construction of sexuality,

especially in a research interview setting, Black women "may feel a greater degree of sexual subjectivity" and control over their lives (p. 90). Additionally, they deflect stigma from these stereotypes by emphasizing "individualism" or "personal expression" as shaping their sexuality as opposed to gendered racism (Montemurro 2018). However, even as women in this group manage stigma by largely stressing individualism, they convey an implicit awareness of these stereotypes which made their minimization necessary.

*"That's Not Who We Are": Accounts of Disavowal, Resistance, and Complicity*

The majority of women (n = 15) indicated that the stereotypes shape their sexuality and they altered their sexual behaviors in some way as a response to negative beliefs about Black women's sexuality. Women in this group not only acknowledged that these stereotypes existed and informed public perceptions of Black women, they also managed the stigma by clinging to "respectable" sexual norms, such as prioritizing sex within relationships. As I argue, as Black women distance themselves from stigma, their resistance reproduces another form of inequality that require women to engage in sexual encounters within the confines of a committed relationship invoking "respectability politics," which ultimately reinforces male dominance.

Latoya, a nineteen-year-old student, first mentioned that these stereotypes didn't impact on her sexuality. She stated, "it didn't really affect my sexual behavior because for me, I would just ignore [the stereotypes] and turn away from them. It never really has affected my sexuality or anything. It doesn't really affect me. It's just more like, are you serious? I'm just irritated [by them]." However, as she continued to discuss her choices in

sexual partners, she shared that she felt comfortable engaging in sex with a partner once she "[got] to know them more" and had "established feelings." However, her motivations for engaging in sex within a relationship, or at least someone with whom she has developed an emotional connection, is colored by the racialized stereotypes of Black women. For example, when asked how she would describe her ideal sex life, she stated:

> I *would* have way more sex. But I feel you're definitely looked at, especially 'cause the Black community is so small here. It's like you're definitely looked at differently for having sex with more guys. So my ideal [sex life], I definitely would like to have more sex […] but it's like I can't 'cause I don't want to be looked at as someone that's, I don't know, a *ho*, you could say. (emphasis added)

Here, Latoya raises a common fear that sex outside a monogamous, committed relationship would invite critique from community members (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). Therefore, she carefully selects her sexual partners and determines the quantity of them, given that her choices may be scrutinized. While she would prefer more casual sexual encounters as she is not "ready for a *serious* relationship," she does not want to face the stigma of a negative label. Therefore, establishing an emotional connection disrupts the depiction of Black women as engaging in brazen sex. This approach to sexuality has also been documented in other studies that find marginalized groups emphasize romantic approaches to derail stereotypes that paint them as sexually promiscuous (Ray and Rosow 2010). Yet, Latoya must mute her sexual desires, a derivative of "politics of respectability," due to these social pressures that police her sexuality.

Several women also shared that they felt uncomfortable initiating sexual encounters. Particularly with newer sexual partners, women would "allow" or "let" men initiate the sexual encounters. For example, Gabrielle stated:

> I think for as much of all of this progressive "I'm the steward of my own sexuality" [laughs], I still get self-conscious. I still get unsure about if I'm attractive to someone, right? So it leaves a little bit of safety in someone initiating sex or initiating like a first kiss. That's like a check-in. "Ooh, they are interested" and then I could proceed [laughs]. Right? I guess it sucks for men to take that risk and lean in or not 'cause they don't know what they're going to get. Hopefully I'm sending off enough vibes and cues so that they know it's okay. But I guess no one wants to be rejected I don't think. […] I think less as like "Oh I'm a forward woman," then that means I'm a slut. So I think I do initiate things, but less around sex.

While Gabrielle feels comfortable taking the initiative in other facets of her life (such as work and family), she is submissive in sexual encounters, particularly in the early stages of a relationship. Similar to Gabrielle, Sam, introduced in Chapter 4, shared that the stereotypes of Black women's sexual aggression have made her more cognizant of her own sexual behaviors. To avoid negative beliefs that Black women are sexually aggressive, she alters how she initiates sex with men and actively engages in sexual practices that Black women stereotypically do not perform. Specifically, she stated:

> I mean oftentimes I like to prove people wrong, but not in a sense where I'm gonna submit to everything you say. But I do know how to step back and *let a man be a man*. And it's when the time permits. But, I'm not gonna take orders so it's just still a halfway point. And I don't have problems with oral sex so if people who don't feel like Black women give oral sex, well it's like "maybe you didn't meet the right one" or "maybe it's just no one wanna do it for you."

Sam highlights another dominant trope – that Black women do not participate in oral sex. This trope supports the stereotype that Black women are prude and thus, unwilling to engage in certain sexual practices. However, by suggesting that she's open to engaging in

oral sex and that perhaps men haven't entered sexual relationships with other Black women who provide this sexual act, she attempts to dispel the stereotype that Black women are sexually conservative.

In addition to deferring to men's sexual initiation, some women also shared their attitudes about sex. These respondents often denounced casual sex or distanced themselves from the possibility of engaging in casual sexual relationships. For example, Charlene (forty-two and human resources professional) shared:

> Charlene: I don't take sex lightly. I feel like it shouldn't be casual. I think it should be between husband and wife and I think it should be where there's no one that should be in that space of your relationship. It should just be mutually between us, spouses.
>
> Interviewer: And you said definitely not casual, can you elaborate why?
>
> Charlene: Not casual meaning I don't think sex outside of marriage should be just gone and fornicating and having sex. Just 'cause I'm young and I can, or I look good. Or for me, being a married woman, I'm not gonna sit there and have sex with someone else. It's just not my character, it's not what I believe. It should monogamous.

Charlene shared that her best sexual experiences were with her husband because she was able to be "freer." That is, sex with her husband was "more relaxing" because with casual sexual partners, "there's no real connection with that person […] it's not as fulfilling. […] There is something to be said about sex within marriage where I feel like that's God ordained. It's like God has a hand in that because that's how it's supposed to be." Charlene's sex with her husband receives divine approval because it is within the context of a committed, monogamous marriage. While Charlene was only one of several respondents who discussed religion as shaping her sexuality (which I did not explicitly elicit from respondents), her response demonstrates that marriage, which implies the

presence of an emotional connection, is significant to her enjoyment of the sexual experience.

Rhianna (introduced in Chapter 4) explained that an emotional connection is a requirement prior to having sex due to its "intimate" nature. While she acknowledged that there are "different kinds of sex" such as one-night stands, the only sex she was interested in having would be with someone with whom she could "possibly have a relationship." She elaborated:

> Sex to me is, it's intimate and it's almost like I'm giving someone a part of me, like a part of me that's involved in this action. So it's not something that I would just easily have with any random person just because it's intimate. I'm one of those girls that will get attached if I have sex with you. I can't just have sex with no emotions attached. So, it's almost just like if I have sex with you, that means there's like, I see a future with us type of thing.

Rhianna constructs sex as intimate because she "gives" part of herself to her sexual partner, and therefore, sex is significant. Implicit in her statement is that a "random person" would not appreciate her gift. This parallels Carpenter's (2002) findings that some women (and men) interpret sex as a "gift" who expect reciprocity in the sexual exchange. Therefore, for Rhianna, sex should not be "given" to someone who has little to no investment in the relationship. Rather, it should be saved for someone who has the possibility to build a long-term relationship with her.

In addition to selectively choosing sexual partners and prioritizing sex within a relationship, some women also shared concern about the race of their sexual partner due to these stereotypes. Kaylah, introduced in Chapter 4, described how the stereotypes influenced her preference for a partner from a specific race and her motivation to date Black men. She described:

> I think it makes it even harder for Black girls to find like a dating partner because like Black men have like this stereotype of you. But then white men, Asian men, Hispanic men, they all kind of have this stereotype of you as well. So I think we're really limited in our dating pool in that sense because I know there's stereotypes about everybody and every type of race, but that one is really pertinent to like, just dating. I think it makes it really hard to find people who are like, are you interested in Black girls? What is your view of us? Are you trying to eroticize me when you date me or do you actually like me? It's all of those questions and concerns.

Kaylah's primary concerns about her dating partner rested on resisting the possibility of fetishizing of Black sexuality. That is, dating non-Black men, to Kaylah, would theoretically increase the chances of being "eroticized" and she would question their motivations for entering a sexual relationship with her.

Women in this group acknowledged the stigma as directly shaping their sexual choices. Their stigma management strategy involved invoking "respectability politics" by engaging in sex within the bounds of a committed, romantic relationship that creates distance with hypersexuality beliefs. However, that they should want relationship sex reinforces the gendered assumption that women, across all racial lines, should avoid casual sex. For Black women, the social repercussions of casual sex are even higher for such violation. Therefore, both resistance and complicity operate in their stigma management. In her study, Pyke (2010) concludes that Asian-American women who desire white men as romantic partners perceive them as egalitarian and therefore, challenge gender inequality. However, Asian-American women simultaneously discount co-ethnic men as suitable partners and reproduce racist assumptions of Asian-American men as domineering and traditional. Similarly, in this case, as women resist the stigma of Black sexual deviancy, it activates another form of (gendered) inequality that expects

women to engage in relationship, not casual, sex. This situates them in a "bind" wherein their sexual choices are highly constrained and highlights the "limits of such resistance" (Pyke 2010: 92). Therefore, Black women face a unique dilemma as they make sexual choices within a highly racialized society that continues to denigrate Black womanhood.

## Discussion and Conclusion

An examination of racialized stereotypes is critical because they deny Black women's humanity and prevent others from understanding Black women's lived realities. Stereotypes of Black women's sexuality matter given they have profound implications for Black women's intra- and interracial dating and marriage patterns (Chambers and Kravitz 2011). At its very core, these stereotypes distort Black women's sexuality and disadvantage them across the dating to marriage spectrum (Childs 2005; Joyner and Kao 2005; Lin & Lindquist 2013; Qian and Lichter 2011; Robnett & Feliciano 2011; Yancey 2009) and preserve white sexuality as desirable (Collins 2005). While previous scholarship has considered how stigma informs Black and non-Black men's perceptions of Black women (Wilkins 2012a), few studies have explored how Black women themselves interpret these "controlling images" and their stigmatized status (Collins 2005; Wingfield and Mills 2012; Wilkins 2012b). I demonstrate how the stigma associated with Black women's sexuality portray them as either paradoxically hypersexual or prude. The respondents shared painful, confused, and dehumanizing misconceptions of Black womanhood in society. My findings exemplify the complicated sexual terrain that Black women navigate. The existence of these contradictory stereotypes of Black women's sexuality ensure that Eurocentric ideals of sexuality, which

privilege white, middle-class, heterosexual women, remain intact (Pyke and Johnson 2003). Institutionalized racism and sexism have corrupted every corner of American imagination to distort the images of Black womanhood (Collins 2005), even trickling down to intraracial members (Wilkins 2012a). I build on previous scholarship by extending how dominant discourses shape Black women's sexuality and how they cope with such stigma. I demonstrate how Black women unjustly experience the burden of having to shift the public imagination of Black womanhood given the resiliency of stereotypes in their everyday lives.

Unlike other research that has demonstrated that racializing discourses can take "color-blind" or covert forms (Dick and Wirtz 2011), the respondents shared explicit racialized messages that conveyed Black women's undesirable and devalued status, and ultimately the racial climate in society. These portrayals that reduce Black women to one-dimensional caricatures inhibit their sexual agency and ultimately, self-determination. These findings suggest that in order for Black women to have greater autonomy over their sexuality (i.e., who, why, and when they want to engage in sex), we must shift the dominant perceptions of Black women's sexuality that have been deeply rooted in U.S. public imagination. This is no easy task given how entrenched these stereotypes are in mass media, social networks, and even their own communities. Furthermore, while many respondents preferred to have sexual encounters within a committed, monogamous relationship that involved intimacy, some also suggested they would want to more freely explore their sexuality. Yet, these stereotypes police Black women's sexuality in fear that engaging in sexual desires would activate stereotypes of Black hypersexuality. However,

by dismantling these stereotypes, this would provide the space for Black women to explore their sexuality, whether it be in relationships or casual encounters, without social repercussions. This self-definition is the key ingredient to Black Feminist Thought (Collins 2000) in order to rework the dehumanizing narratives of Black women (Rose 2003).

Future research should continue to center Black women's sexual realities in order to dispel the dehumanizing narratives of Black women's sexuality (Rose 2003). While understanding non-heterosexual Black women's management of stigma was beyond the scope of the study, future research should build on prior literature (Ferguson 2004; Hammonds 2004; Lorde 1984; Moore 2011) to decenter heteronormativity by investigating how lesbian and queer Black women experience marginality and manage. Additional research is needed that will help us understand how non-heterosexual Black women interpret and manage stigma, further clarifying how inequalities converge. Furthermore, while not elicited in the responses, religion may play a significant role in Black women's sexuality and should be fleshed out in future studies. Do religious-affiliated Black women cling to "respectability politics" relative to secular Black women?

# CHAPTER 6

## Thick Expectations: Black Women's Sexual Body Image

In this chapter, I center Black women's perceptions of their body and how their body image relates to their sexuality, or *sexual body image*. My objective in this chapter is to develop an analysis that highlights the complexity of Black women's body image, which prior research has distilled into a simplistic understanding that Black women possess positive body image. I explain how Black women's body anxieties, especially as it relates to weight, complicate their sexual desires and experiences of sex. Additionally, I demonstrate how their sexual or romantic partner's messages about their body reinforce cultural expectations placed on Black women's bodies. I offer the concept of the "thick imperative" to highlight the conflicting pressures Black women experience to embody a specific body shape from their Black partners and community despite mainstream society's emphasis on thinness. In so doing, I highlight how race, gender, embodiment, and sexuality interlock to shape Black women's *sexual body image* and experiences of sex. Therefore, Black women's bodies are a site of social significance and involuntary power relations that warrant further research.

## Background Literature

### *Prior Literature on Black Women's (Sexual) Body Image*

Historically, Black women have received intense scrutiny for their physical appearance as they are stereotypically perceived as deviant (Kwate and Threadcraft 2015). Representations of Black women have persisted throughout history to create false and dehumanizing narratives of Black womanhood, especially as it relates to their bodies.

For example, European colonizers sold Saartjie Baartman, or colloquially known as "The Hottentot Venus," into indentured servitude and placed her on display around Europe to be sexually objectified and abused (Collins 2005, hooks 1992). This established the sexual stereotypes of Black women possessing hypersexualized body features (namely the buttocks) and paradoxically embodying the "objects of white repulsion and desire" (Craig 2006: 168.) These racialized differences then are externally inscribed on Black women's bodies which result in moral panics around Black women's sexuality (Strings 2015). "Controlling images" then activate our social imagination of how Black women should not only physically appear, but also sexually behave (Collins 2005). Two of the dominant "controlling images" of Black women mobilized in society are the asexual, fat mammy and the hypersexual, thin jezebel (Collins 2005). In either case, Black women are positioned outside the white standard body ideal which deems whiteness as beautiful (Patton 2006). Even if Black women embody a slender body, they cannot escape Eurocentric beauty standards that were designed to exclude Black women who can never be white (Craig 2006; Thompson and Keith 2001).

To the extent that Black women's body image has been recently studied, the research shows that they report relatively high rates of body satisfaction (Cash and Henry 1995; Cox, Zunker, Wingo, Thomas, and Ard 2010; DeBranganza and Hausenblas 2010; Frisby 2004), despite the existence in society of the dominant ideal of the body as, among other things, white (Saguy 2011). In studies that compare body image among groups of women, Black women tend to report higher body satisfaction than their white counterparts (Lovejoy 2001; Overstreet, Quinn, and Agocha 2010; Thompson 1992).

Black feminist scholars attribute this finding to indicate how African-American women are less likely to evaluate their body in terms of weight (Bennett et al. 2006) in addition to Black communities' greater latitude to inhabit larger bodies. A more critical body of literature suggests that women's preoccupation with the body cuts across racial/ethnic lines (Cheney 2011; Poran 2006; Thompson 2011), suggesting that the conclusions of Black women's "greater satisfaction" may be over-simplistic and inaccurate. While Black women may be immune to the dominant ideal of the body as thin, young, and able in addition to being white, this does not exonerate them from other anxieties about their body image (Thompson 2003).

While Eurocentric beauty standards remain dominant in society, Black communities developed their own standards of beauty as a "corollary of oppression" (Waring 2017: 147). The "Black is Beautiful" movement in the 1960's mobilized to resist (and critique) these Eurocentric beauty standards and ushered in the celebration of Afro-centric features (Craig 2002: 164) such as "thickness" or curves (Gentles-Peart 2017; Nichter 2000; Jones and Shorter-Gooden 2003). The "oppositional gaze," as theorized by hooks (1992), suggests that constant exposure to racist images in the media fostered Black women's resistance to the "controlling images" that they consider objectifying. Therefore, "misrepresentations" of Black women stimulated Black women's critical consciousness to de-identify with and contest "controlling images" (Poran 2006: 740). As a result, Black women embraced curvier body sizes, natural hair and dark-skin, features a white supremacist society deems undesirable. Additionally, Black men's cultural preferences may also encourage Black women to embrace a more voluptuous body

(Jackson and McGill 1996; Poran 2006). Therefore, Black communities, including Black romantic partners' preferences for "thickness," act as a potential buffer to oppressive Eurocentric beauty ideals. However, this cultural preference for "thickness" might create additional pressures for women to embody a specific body shape to appear desirable to partners (Poran 2006). This chapter will also consider how their partner's preferences potentially shape their perceptions of *sexual body image*.

With the growing national concern about the obesity "epidemic" (Boero 2007; Wilson 2010), Black communities often absorb greater public scrutiny for their bodies (Strings 2015). Given that non-Blacks disproportionately categorize Black women as overweight (Kwate and Threadcraft 2015), Black men and women who do not conform to thinness are stigmatized as morally bankrupt (Strings 2015). Often, they are stereotyped as lacking self-control and engaging in unhealthy dietary choices to explain their health status and higher levels of obesity (Saguy and Gruys 2010; Hill 2009). The prescription to combat the obesity "epidemic" often insists that individuals change their eating habits and engage in physical activity (Saguy 2011). However, relative to individual explanations, structural explanations, such as lack of access to healthy food and lack of time to engage in physical activity, provide far more compelling explanations of the weight and health status among marginalized communities (Ray 2014).Black women's physical appearance is judged based on assumptions that assign blame to individual women rather than to social structure. Therefore, Black women who prefer a curvier body cannot escape the health ideologies that render Black communities as unhealthy.

Weight among Black women plays a more complex role in their lives than the health literature indicates, which has contemporarily symbolized a lack of self-discipline (Thompson 1994). Black feminist scholars argue that some Black women may carry more weight as a coping mechanism to systemic gendered racism (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2003; Lovejoy 2001). Black women may engage in compulsive eating as a means of survival in a society that devalues and exploits Black womanhood. However, Black women's heavier weight can potentially contribute to health vulnerabilities (Harris 2006; Hill 2009; Lovejoy 2001). Additionally, some Black women carry weight intentionally to desexualize their bodies (Thompson 1994); yet, they are not immune from acts of sexual violence, such as "hogging"[2] that targets women of size (Gailey and Prohaska 2006). Furthermore, as Black women's heavier weight is normalized (Townsend Gilkes 2001), carrying more weight serves as a litmus test of their Black femininity (Collins 2000; Hill 2009). Therefore, weight among Black women reflects not only deeply embedded social problems of racism, sexism, and poverty, it also serves a cultural resource to "prove" their Black womanhood or racial identity (Collins 2000). The audience and social context, then, significantly shape how women interpret and evaluate weight. However, scant research has examined how Black women feel about their body, and in particular, their weight, as it relates to their sexual experiences.

[2] Gailey and Prohaska (2006) describe "hogging" as a sexually degrading act where men intentionally seek women they consider fat to humiliate and sexually mistreat. Hogging can include sexual harassment to rape and is often used to project men's control over women, and therefore, bolster men's sense of masculinity.

*Link Between Body Image and Sexuality*

Scholars have recently started to examine how body image connects to women's sexuality (Wiederman and Hurst 1998), given that "the body is the locus of our pleasures" (Craig 2006: 160). The sexual script (i.e., how a person should act during sex) not only dictates gendered norms of sexual interaction (Simon and Gagnon 1986), it also encourages women to embody thinness in order to be deemed "sexy" (Bartky 1988), as fatness is socially constructed as sexually undesirable (Gailey 2012, 2014). In other words, failure to meet society's rigid standard of beauty, which is both gendered and racialized, results in women feeling intense body shame (Schooler 2008). In a sexual encounter, body shame may interfere with women's sexual pleasure (Meana and Nunnink 2006). As a result, women's poor body image may interfere with their sexual relationships and contribute to negative (i.e., unpleasurable or less pleasurable) sexual experiences. Women may also internalize the "gaze" of their sexual partner and experience discomfort with their bodies, making it difficult for them to achieve body satisfaction and enjoy sex (Waskul, Vannini, and Wiesen 2007).

For example, Montemurro and Gillen (2013) find that poor body image, especially associated with aging-related physical changes, such as weight gain and wrinkles, prevents women from feeling sexually desirable and causes them in sexual encounters to feel discomfort, disconnected from their partner, and less sexual confidence. Similarly, Gailey (2012) argues that body insecurity among women of size creates intense feelings of shame that interfere with women's sexual enjoyment and diminished sexual satisfaction. While both studies highlight the significance of body

image to sexual experiences, this chapter diverges from the prior literature by considering how culturally-specific body ideals influence Black women's *sexual body image*.

Unfortunately, scant studies have investigated how Black women's body image interacts with their sexuality. Given that a significant dimension of sexuality involves the body (i.e., sex is an embodied experience), the extant literature leaves us with an incomplete understanding of Black women's body image. Perhaps uncritically, scholars have assumed that Black women possess positive body image across all social contexts. In an effort to enhance our understanding of the multiple dimensions of Black women's body image (and sexuality), I bridge the two aforementioned literatures by exploring how Black women feel about their bodies in a sexual context.

In this chapter, I consider how body image shapes Black women's sexuality or how body image figures into women's sense of sexual desirability. The dominant assumption is that Black women positively evaluate their bodies. Yet, studies making this assumption have made broad generalizations without contextualizing specific situations that may influence body image. I argue that sexual encounters heighten anxieties around body issues for women. Therefore, Black women may not be immune from poor body image in the context of a sexual encounter, given the multiple cultural pressures to embody a particular body size. Yet, studies have not examined how sexual encounters may influence women's sense of desirability.

I ask, how do Black women, who generally report having a positive body image, feel about their body in the context of a sexual encounter? And how do their perceptions of body image shape their experiences of the sexual encounter? Additionally, I examine

the messages about their bodies that Black women perceive to receive from their romantic or sexual partners, a topic which is important because sexual experiences are an *embodied* activity shared with a sexual partner. I isolate the body in my analysis to better understand its role in women's sexual experiences and sexual intimacy. I build on Montemurro and Gillen's (2013) concept of *sexual body image* that examines how women evaluate their bodies in a sexual encounter. Therefore, I pose these questions to deepen our understanding of Black women's body image, particularly a dimension of Black women's sexual lives not commonly explored in the literature. This chapter explores the intersections of race, gender, the body, and sexuality with the following research questions:

1) What is Black women's *sexual body image*? And how does their *sexual body image* shape their sexual encounters?

2) What types of messages do they receive from their romantic partners about their body? Do they internalize these messages? Do their partner's messages affect their *sexual body image*?

**Analysis**

To investigate the relationship between Black women's sexual body image and sexual experiences, I examine 31 respondents of varied weights and their views of their body within a sexual encounter or how their body image affects their experience of sex. I directly asked: "Many women report that their feelings about their own bodies affect their experience of sex. Is this true for you?" and "What comments do you receive about your body from your current sexual/romantic partner (or from a past sexual/romantic

partner)?" I often asked additional, probing questions, such as, "Do you think your body matters to your partner?" and "How do you feel about these comments?" to discern if they internalized messages from sexual partners. I operationalize *sexual body image* as women's perceptions of their bodies within a sexual encounter. This study is unique by assessing women's ideal body as opposed to imposing a specific body size as a point of reference (Poran 2006).

The identified themes include 1) Black women's *sexual body image* as tied to weight and 2) Black women's discomfort around changes in their body size. While romantic partners provide affirming messages about their bodies, they also provide conflicting messages encouraging Black women to embody "thickness" to be sexually attractive. I offer the concept of the "thick imperative" – that is, the conflicting pressures Black women face to possess curvier bodies that symbolize Black femininity to attract partners; yet, "thickness" also undermines women's feelings of sexual desirability. The "thick imperative" captures the paradox of both mainstream and cultural body ideals that situate Black women, regardless of their body size, in a bind.

## Findings

### *Black Women's Sexual Body Image*

Because the respondents, as Black women, are situated in the intersections of multiple social inequalities, their feelings about their bodies reflect contradictions, anxieties, and tensions. The women overwhelmingly reported that their own and other people's negative perceptions of their body interfered with their sex life. Because they were uncomfortable with some aspect of their body, their sexual experiences suffered as a

result. None of the women in the sample focused on the positive aspects of their body image when asked broadly how their body image shaped their sexual encounters. This result suggests that women are encouraged to view their bodies as "projects" that require constant work (Bartky 2010). In other words, contemporary culture prevents women from focusing on their sexual needs and desires (in addition to celebrating their bodies), and instead, directs their attention towards their socially constructed bodily "flaws." While some research insists that Black culture shields Black women from body image issues (Poran 2002: 67), women in the sample expressed concern over changes in their body that undermine their sexual encounters.

Many women (n = 20) discussed how their dissatisfaction with their weight shaped their sexual experiences. That is, women often pointed to changes in their bodies related to weight gain that prevented sexually satisfying experiences. Mariah (introduced in Chapter 4) described how her weight gain makes her feel "self-conscious" to the point where she covers her body "as much as possible." She stated, "Because of my body issues [weight gain] that I have right now, I'm not a fan of nudity at the moment. If I didn't have the extra weight, nudity would be great. I'm okay with it when I'm at my preferable weight. I despise it when I'm not." When asked how her sex life would change if she were at her "preferred" weight, she said:

> I would be more *free*. I wouldn't be tryna cover up all the time. When I'm at my *right* weight, I'm just loosey goosey all over the place. But when I'm not, I just try to cover up and it's a strain because I'm always tryna cover up. And that's the only thing on my mind - covering up. [emphasis added]

Mariah proceeded to explain how "free" meant engaging in her sexual desires without the constant preoccupation with her body. Therefore, her concern with "covering up" hinders

her sexual performance to the point that she views sex with her husband as "work" (i.e., hiding her body) as opposed to leisure.

Weight anxieties also manifested in some women's choice to keep their bodies covered during sex. Chloe (introduced in Chapter 4) shared how her weight prevented her from feeling the desire to have sex and be nude with her sexual partner. She stated, "if you don't feel good about yourself, I feel like you wouldn't be so open about having sex. Because sex is such a vulnerable thing; you're naked in front of somebody. That person sees all your flaws. So if you're not good with yourself, sex is just not something you would want to have." Therefore, exposing one's body with a partner invites additional body anxieties or even suppresses the desire to engage in sex altogether. Similarly, Breeyan (introduced in Chapter 4) described feeling "vulnerable" with past sexual partners due to how she feels about her body in a sexual encounter. She stated, "I think when I feel better about my body, I do feel sexier. When I feel like I'm in shape, I feel sexier. I feel I'm more appealing. I had a hard time, I think, feeling sexy when I feel out of shape." Ranisha (introduced in Chapter 4) also stressed that in the absence of anxieties around her body (i.e., a "muffin top"), she would feel more inclined to give her partner permission to undress her. She stated, "I think my partner would like all of my clothes off […] But I don't like that just because I'm self-conscious about my body." For Mariah, Chloe, Breeyan and Ranisha, the stress of showing their bodies to their partners produced less ideal sexual encounters. Instead of focusing on sexual pleasure, the women focused on how their bodies appeared. This resonates with prior research that demonstrates

focusing on physical appearance can interfere with positive sexual experiences and produce feelings of "disembodiment" for women (Satinsky et al. 2014).

Daniella (introduced in Chapter 4) also mentioned how her body image, related to weight, produced less sexually satisfying encounters. She stated, "When I'm not comfortable with myself, I don't really want to do too much or explore or make [sex] fun […] I wouldn't want to do as many positions because I feel like I would use the blanket to cover [myself] up so he didn't see my body." Daniella also suggested that if she were to expose her body to her partner, she believes it would be a "turn off for him" and would risk prematurely ending the sexual encounter and/or relationship. Alexis (introduced in Chapter 5) suggested how being comfortable with her weight would enable her to be more "in the moment" during the sexual encounter, as opposed to worrying about how her sexual partner views her body.

While the majority of women in the sample described gaining weight as interfering with their sense of sexual desirability, other respondents reported struggles with not embodying cultural expectations to be "thick." The "thick imperative," as I call it, is the cultural requirement for Black women to fit (and endorse) the curvaceous body ideal in order to be attractive and embody Black femininity. Given the tenacious existence of this imperative, women with small bodies reported that they felt less sexually desirable. When asked what "thick" means, many respondents defined it as "bottom heavy," as in having a large rear end; "meaty," as in fleshy and not bony or skinny; and/or "round," as in voluptuous or curvy. These physical features are historically

racialized and attached to expectations of Black woman's bodies (Craig 2006; Schooler 2008). Molly, a 19 year-old college student, stated:

> I feel ok with [my body], but I really would like to be a little thicker, just because I feel in the urban community, of course, it's frowned upon being as skinny as I am. Or, that's the first thing that people initiate with me - how small I am. "Oh, you're really small." And so to keep the attention off, yes, I would like to be more heavy set, not as heavy. Just you know, the *natural* kind. I don't want to say the video kind of picture of how African American women are seen. [emphasis added]

Molly, along with several other respondents, desired to be "thicker," as they believed that thickness was an essential trait to Black womanhood and sex appeal. Under that logic, then, having a thin body contradicts her racial and gender identity as Black woman, and threatens her sense of belonging to the "urban community." Additionally, Molly cited receiving unwanted, negative sexual attention about her body. In order to avoid such attention, she desires to gain weight (within a range, however). By achieving the "thicker" ideal, Molly would reinforce her belonging to her community as well as avoid interactions that point attention to her body size. Molly's reference to videos highlights the stereotypical portrayals of Black women in the media as "promiscuous" (i.e., a modern iteration of the "jezebel" stereotype), where a voluptuous body is associated with hypersexuality (Stephen and Phillips 2001; White 2013). She internalized the belief of "excess" weight on African-American women as hypersexual, and therefore, wants to have a body size that is "natural," invoking a biological understanding of racial differences with regards to body size (Ray 2014).

The responses above highlight how *sexual body image* operates for Black women during sexual encounters. Given that the majority of the women in the sample reported

some form of body anxiety, their accounts underscore the significance of understanding Black women's body image contextually. Broad generalizations of Black women's body satisfaction obscure the nuances of body image. As they reported engaging in constant body surveillance during sexual encounters, this attention to their physical appearance distracted women from attention to their physical feeling. In turn, the women were not fully present and agentic in the sexual encounter.

Sam (introduced in Chapter 4) was the only respondent in the sample for whom body image issues did not appear to negatively affect her sexual experiences. When asked if her body image influenced her sexual experiences, she replied:

> I don't think feelings about my body impacts [sex] because I think if you've already gotten to the point to have sex, then this person must like something about your body. Because [you two] wouldn't have made it this far. And I think that comes from kinda being in a past relationship where a person said they weren't attracted to me because of my body. I feel like if a person wasn't attracted, they wouldn't initiate in that moment. If we made it that far, I feel like you accept my body for what it is, and I'm comfortable with it because it's happening already.

Sam's response was unique in the sample. Her past relationship clearly contributed to her current view of her body. Given her traumatic past relationship, where she was heavily criticized for her (large) body size, she now feels comfortable with her body in a sexual encounter because she views herself and her partner as mutually accepting and valuing each other's bodies as they are.

### *Messages about Women's Sexual Body Image*

In this section, I highlight the messages women receive from romantic or sexual partners about their body. The messages from partners reflect both dominant and Black cultural ideals about what is considered sexually attractive for Black women to embody.

While the majority of women garnered messages that celebrated their body (n = 20), their partners' expectations of "thickness" reinforced a standard for Black women that produced tension in their *sexual body image*. Therefore, women negotiated the "thick imperative" with the dominant body ideal that renders curvier bodies as undesirable.

Chloe (introduced in Chapter 4) reported that a former partner would positively comment on her body, including during sex. He would state, "You have a nice body. You have a perfect waist. I love your waist." He "loved" her body "unconditionally," and she cherished these messages that "put a smile on [her] face." Other women who received positive messages like Chloe felt "empowered" by them. As a result of the positive messages she received from her partners, Nia (introduced in Chapter 4), who typically does not feel "hot or sexual," felt more sexually confident that she could "have that sort of effect on men." For Chloe and Nia, these messages reaffirm their feelings of sexual desirability.

Monique (introduced in Chapter 4) shared how her current boyfriend has witnessed her body size change. She explained, "I had my boyfriend since when we were younger and I was super skinny and now he's *still* my boyfriend when I'm thicker. Now he's like, 'I like your new weight gain, I like it [….] You should have some meat on your stomach.'" However, while her boyfriend appreciated her new body size, she provided a caveat that as long as she wasn't "obese," her partner would continue to remain in the relationship. Similarly, Jada (introduced in Chapter 4) received positive comments from her fiancé that improved her *sexual body image* and "made her feel good" when her partner "[adored]" her. However, she provided a hypothetical scenario in which she was

"super overweight" and questioned whether her partner would continue adoring her body. Jada concluded that he "wouldn't be okay with it" and would potentially end the relationship if her body size increased dramatically.

A handful of women (n = 9) shared narratives in which their partner criticized their body and particularly their weight. Prior research suggests that Black men prefer voluptuous bodies (Jackson and McGill 1996), and this preference can frustrate women who are not considered "thick." Daniella expressed how her past partner desired her to have more voluptuous features. According to Daniella, her partner "wanted [her] to be a little more curvaceous, because he would always say I don't have any booty." He even suggested that she engage in physical activity such as "squats" to accentuate her curves. When asked how she felt about these comments, she replied, "I would get irritated because it's not like he had the ideal body [for a man]. But it would kind of irritate me because I felt like being African-American, that's the *stigma* that you're putting on me, that I'm supposed to be thick. And if I'm not thick, it wasn't necessarily good enough." That Daniella didn't meet her partner's racialized expectation of embodying more curves created distress in her relationship. She also highlighted the double standard that places more emphasis on women's appearance than men's to attract and maintain heterosexual relationships (Bartky 2010). She internalized these comments and as a result, they negatively affected her self-worth to the point that she had a "shell" when it came to sexual encounters with him.

Brea (introduced in Chapter 5) received messages from her partner that discouraged her from changing her body or losing her "thickness." When asked how her partner prefers her body size, she shared:

> Brea: He just wants me to be happy. He loves the size that I am, but if I say I want to lose weight, he be like, "I don't see why. You don't need to. Everything's there for a reason." But if I want to [lose weight], he'll support it and be like "just don't lose too much," because I don't think he wants me to be too thin. And what's too thin for him, I [don't] have the slightest idea. So he's happy with where I am.
>
> Interviewer: You had mentioned that he's happy with any size, but you said not thin?
>
> Brea: Yea, I don't know what's too thin for him. Yea I don't know. This size is good for him. I think I had lost [weight]. I think I was sick or something, I had lost a few pounds. He noticed, I didn't. So, I don't know what's too thin for him.

While Brea's partner wants her to be happy, whatever her body size, he also discouraged her from becoming too thin which conflicted with her weight loss due to illness.

Anya (introduced in Chapter 4) wanted to become more physically active to reduce her blood pressure and "relieve stress," but still wanted to keep her "thound" (which she defines as "thick" and "round") body shape for her sexual partner. She shared, "I still want him to be proud when he sees me, when people see me on his arm." Anya must balance her desire to improve her health status, but also not losing her "thound" body shape that would risk her partner's disapproval. These responses illustrate the balance that Black women negotiate in wanting to have, on the one hand, healthy bodies and, on the other hand, sexually appealing bodies.

Some women received comments revealing that their partner was preoccupied with their weight gain because they associated with less sexual desirability. Nina (introduced in Chapter 4) shared:

> I just think my ex-husband wasn't attracted to me anymore because I gained so much weight. […] He probably wanted me to look the way I looked when we married. Although he didn't say it, I think I felt like [his] concern for me is not real, because [he] really just wanted me to look a certain way. So he might say "Come on, you got to do this for your *health*." But in my mind it was, you really don't care about my health. You just want me to look the way I looked before.

Nina attributes the dissolution of the relationship in part to her husband losing "attraction" to her body. When asked to elaborate on how her body changed, particularly after having children, she replied "[Black men] like their women thicker, but thick shapely, not thick overweight. Me being thick and shapely, he wouldn't have a problem." After having children, she shared that her changing body size created tensions in the relationship where "he just wants me to be cute […] when I met him. Probably he was embarrassed by his overweight wife […] because I gained so much weight and this wasn't who he married." Therefore, since her husband categorized her body size in the latter category (i.e., "thick overweight"), it was unacceptable (to him) and played a large part, as she believed, in their marriage dissolution. Similarly, Safa (introduced in Chapter 4) shared how a past partner pressured her to maintain her body size or not to gain additional weight. She recounted a conversation in which he told her, "if you keep your body *like this*, you'll never have to worry about me going anywhere." Her partner implies that more weight would potentially trigger his departure from the relationship and/or motivation to seek another sexual partner. However, this placed a heavy burden on Safa to remain sexually appealing to her partner. Nina and Safa's responses highlight the pressure that Black women face to remain "thick," but not carry "excess" weight that would render them sexually undesirable.

Some respondents shared how partners couch comments about the women's weight in discourse about health. Healthism equates being healthy to being moral and assigns the responsibility for maintaining health to individual people (Saguy and Gruys 2010). In a healthist paradigm, thinness is conflated with health, despite studies that demonstrate that Black women are, in fact, healthier at heavier weights (Strings 2015). While some women's partners never made explicit statements that the women should lose weight for the purpose of appearing more sexually desirable to them, their comments nevertheless reinforced the dominant belief that losing weight would enhance the women's lives (i.e., health status), particularly their sexual lives. For example, Sade (introduced in Chapter 4) expressed:

> With my current boyfriend, he never really comments [about my body] per se. When I did gain weight, he didn't care. Well, I didn't get the sense that it bothered him at all. But he'd tell me, you need to get more *in shape* so that we can have more options for our sex. I can sustain being on top as opposed to getting burnt out. And I can understand that because, of course, he does want more reciprocation. I understood that and we'd talk about different things that I can [do] for me to build my strength. For him, it was all about being stronger, I guess, not necessarily looking a certain way. He's always been supportive and I guess a reaffirming factor when it comes like to how I see myself. [emphasis added]

Although Sade first emphasized that her partner accepted her body (with weight gain), she still felt pressure to get in "shape" which is often coded language to lose weight (Saguy 2011). In addition to these messages from her partner, Sade received messages from her family that she is too "skinny." Therefore, Sade's new (curvier) body may stave off negative comments from family members; yet, it may upset her partner. Ultimately, Sade internalized the messages from her boyfriend and began to engage in physical activity to better "satisfy" her partner by improving her sexual capabilities. This required

that Sade to change her body to meet her partner's expectations at the expense of disapproving comments from family members.

Charlene (introduced in Chapter 5) described how her *sexual body image* directly influenced her sexual relationship with her husband. Charlene described that she had recently gained weight as a result of becoming the primary care-taker of both her husband and aunt, both of whom are ill. As her body wasn't the "priority at the time," the stress of her new role was accompanied by weight gain. When she had negative perceptions of her body, she explained that it "brings a negative to the relationship. He doesn't care if I gain X amount of weight. […] I don't think my body has the potential to get obese. He doesn't want me [to be] obese, looking gross. He wants me to take care of myself." Charlene's comment reflects the dominant assumption that overweight bodies (or those categorized as "obese") are unhealthy bodies that require "care." Moreover, obese bodies are typically considered "unsexy" or unattractive which would theoretically interfere with a partner's sexual enthusiasm (Gailey 2012). Charlene and Sade's narratives underscore the nuances of weight and how it is tied to healthism – that is, their partners implicitly criticized their changing body size through the logics of healthism and deemed them less sexually desirable.

While many of the women who received comments insinuating that weight gain would reduce their sexual desirability, other women received comments indicating that heavy weight and "thickness" were exoticized. For example, Aisha (introduced in Chapter 6) explained how past partners had fetishized her curvy body and pursued romantic relationships with her solely due to her body size. She stated, "They [her past

partners] were more into bigger girls, so that's kind of mainly why I dated them. It wasn't even because I really liked them. When they talked about my body, I would be really self-conscious about my body, even to them." While Aisha recalled receiving "compliments" about her "big thighs" from these partners, she didn't interpret these comments as positive. Rather, she perceived them as perpetuating African American men's unrealistic expectations of Black women (i.e., the "thick imperative). Despite the fact that she embodies the cultural expectation, she nevertheless interprets comments about her body as sexualizing "thicker girls" and reinforcing racialized stereotypes of Black women (Nagel 2003). In other words, her sexual appeal stemmed from her body size, something she felt she had little control over.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter examined Black women's *sexual body image* and its impact on sexual experiences. I find that how women view their bodies significantly affects their sexual experiences. It prevents women from feeling comfortable in their sexual interactions, encourages them to intentionally hide their body from sexual partners, causes them to have less satisfactory sex, and motivates sex avoidance. Weight and weight gain were particularly salient in women's sexual body image contrary to prior literature which suggests that Black women evaluate body image outside the thin ideal (Overstreet et al. 2010). These findings are noteworthy given that the race and body image literature generally holds that Black women possess positive body image. However, by examining, as I did in this study, body image in specific social contexts (in this case, the context of a sexual encounter), it is clear that this general finding does not

hold. In the context of sex, Black women have substantial anxieties about their bodies, reflecting a negative body image. None of the women in the sample provided examples of how their bodies could *positively* shape their experiences of sex, thus indicating the hegemonic ideology that women should be most concerned with their appearance in terms of their sexuality as opposed to sexual performance (Bartky 2010).

This chapter also reveals how broader cultural messages produce additional body anxieties to meet cultural expectations of "thickness" regardless of body size or the "thick imperative." Some Black women experienced cultural pressures to embody a more voluptuous body as "proof" of racial membership and sexual desirability to Black men. Yet, that imperative makes women feel uncomfortable in their sexual encounters. While many of the respondents' sexual partners provided affirming messages about their body, the women expressed concern over weight gain as hindering their sexual encounters. And for several women, messages about weight gain reduced their feelings of sexual desirability and even jeopardized their relationships. Similar to white women's expectation of thinness, these expectations thrusted on Black women provide an intentionally very narrow standard for them to meet; thus, Black women are expected to expend significant amount of labor and money to meet this ideal. Yet, this maintains Black women's subordinated position in society.

In conclusion, it is imperative to recognize how *sexual body image* shapes Black women's sexual experiences. By situating the body at the center of my analysis, I highlight how Black women contend with contradictory messages about "thickness" and their weight. I build on prior literature by demonstrating how culturally-specific

assumptions of Black women's bodies shape their sexual experiences and interactions with Black sexual partners. This chapter helps us recognize the tension Black women experience to embody thickness and also to possess positive *sexual body image*, even when the two appear to be incongruent. Black women must navigate two conflicting ideals, which in either case, render them as "othered." Therefore, these findings tell us the larger story about how race, gender, and sexuality intersect to marginalize Black women.

Future scholarship should investigate how Black women resist conflicting expectations of "thickness" and the dominant body ideal of thinness, which I did not explicitly address—that is, do Black women deliberately choose romantic or sexual partners who celebrate their body size? For example, do Black women have racial preferences for partners who celebrate a certain body size? And given the increasing number of interracial relationships between Black women and non-Black men (Waring 2017), future research should examine messages Black women receive from their interracial partners – that is, what messages do non-Black men make about Black women's bodies and how do Black women interpret these messages? Also, future research could examine how colorism interacts with the "thick imperative" – that is, do Black women with lighter skin feel more pressure to embody thickness given that light skin, while socially valued both in and outside Black communities, challenges their racial membership (Thompson and Keith 2001)? Furthermore, prior literature has demonstrated that middle- and upper-class Black women are more likely to endorse thinner bodies as a means for upward social mobility (Poran 2006). However, more research is needed to determine how social class and "thickness" interact to shape Black women's *sexual body*

*image*. These questions would clarify how Black women internalize and potentially resist conflicting messages circulating in society about Black women's bodies.

These findings have broader implications for society particularly in social marketing campaigns that target Black women as consumers. Campaigns should include more diverse body sizes in order to disrupt "controlling images" of Black women as either "thick" or "thin" and instead, celebrate all sizes. Breaking this binary would promote Black women whose bodies fit in the middle as well as promote diversity at the extremes. Furthermore, while the media industry has historically excluded Black women from leading roles in television and movies (and designated them to supporting roles if at all), there is a slow increase of incorporating Black actresses as the lead (Young 2006). Yet, often these roles conform to stereotypes of Black women as desexualized "mammies" or hypersexualized "jezebels" (Collins 2005; hooks 1992). Therefore, creating roles for Black women of all body sizes that demonstrate their sexual desirability divorced from racialized sexual stereotypes is urgently needed to expose more diverse body sizes.

# CHAPTER 7

## Conclusion

Historically, the legacy of slavery distorted Black women's sexuality, constructing Black women as hypersexual and aggressive "jezebels," or unfeminine "mammies" (Collins 2000, 2005) or the antithesis of white womanhood. These racial beliefs or ideologies function to deny Black women's humanity and justify institutionalized discrimination. This characterization robbed Black women of sexual agency and self-definition. While the terms "jezebel" and "mammy" may no longer have currency today, the assumptions that foreground them remain relevant to understanding contemporary Black women's sexuality. The new racism reanimates these historical assumptions of Black women's sexuality to continually oppress communities of color (Collins 2005) and mark Black women's bodies as sexually consumable in mass media (hooks 1992). Stereotypes of Black women serve to not only objectify them through one-dimensional portrayals, they also function as "forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life" (1990: 69). Therefore, collectively, the stereotypes of Black women's deviant sexuality are constantly reproduced and heavily steeped into American consciousness which many Americans embrace without critical thought.

Racialized sexual stereotypes indeed matter as the broader culture perpetuates them (Collins 2005) and acutely monitors and scrutinizes Black women's sexual behaviors and practices (Roberts 1997). This creates social conditions that unequally allocate "sexual privilege" to racially dominant groups who engage in sexual practices

without the same degree of social repercussions (Armstrong et al. 2014). For example, studies highlight how race- and class-advantaged groups secure privileges from the "hook up" culture on college campuses relative to their marginalized peers who rarely experience such impunity (Bogle 2008; Armstrong et al. 2014; Ray and Rosow 2009). Culture is inextricably tied then to Black women's sexuality; it both constrains their sexual practices and expression (Collins 2005; Stephen and Philips 2003) and incites Black women to carve out space for sexual agency, although limited (Chepp 2015; Lee 2010; Lindsey 2013). Black feminist scholars have been at the forefront at deconstructing these damaging stereotypes, and a long tradition in Black feminist scholarship concentrates on how broader structural forces ideologically and materially compromise Black women's sexual lives. Building on the trailblazing work of these Black feminist scholars, this project emerged to better understand Black women's sexual experiences that transcend sexual health behaviors and sexual-decision making that too often frame the research on Black sexualities (Bowleg et al. 2004; Gabriel 2002). This dissertation extends the research on how culture, particularly through cultural expectations of Black women's bodies and racialized sexual stereotypes, shapes Black women's most intimate encounters.

In this dissertation, I demonstrated how dominant frameworks have been inadequate to explain the experiences of Black women who encounter multiple intersecting inequalities. Through in-depth interviews with 31 women, I broaden the scope of Black women's sexuality by examining their sexual pleasure, stigma management, and sexual body image, which are underexamined topics in the Black

sexualities research. This study drew on intersectionality, the theoretically ground-breaking scholarship by Black feminists both inside and outside of the academy that illustrates how Black women occupy a unique social position (Collins 1986, 2000, 2005; Combahee River Collective 1997; Crenshaw 1993; hooks 1984).

Many studies on sexuality and body image use comparisons across racial groups revealing an ethnocentric bias of white women's experiences as the reference point (DeBraganza and Hausenblas 2010; Fahs and Swank 2011; Gonzales and Rolison 2005; Harper and Tiggemann 2008; Poran 2002; Satinsky et al. 2012; Thompson 1992). Therefore, these studies draw inaccurate, simplistic, and limited conclusions that do not resonate with the experiences of racially marginalized women (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2003; Lee 2010; Vidal-Ortiz et al. 2018; Wingfield and Mills 2012). Instead, my dissertation captured the ways in which Black women confront multiple structural inequalities that inform and constrain their intimate experiences. Black women encountered severe stigma tied to assumptions of hypersexuality, as sexual innocence has historically been reserved for white and class-privileged women. This required Black women to engage in stigma management to defuse racialized sexual stereotypes, altering their sexual-decision making in the process. Additionally, I highlighted how Black women negotiate two body ideals that create conflicting pressures and shape their sexual body image. Therefore, I centered Black women's stories to provide a richer understanding of how social forces directly and indirectly shape their sexuality.

In Chapter 4, I focused on Black women's conceptualizations of sexual pleasure. I argued that the literature on Black sexualities tends to skew towards sexual trauma and

violence in Black women's lives. One of the prominent challenges in Black feminist research, then, has been how to reconcile Black women's historical legacies of sexual violence while acknowledging the possibilities of sexual desire and pleasure (Chepp 2016; Jones 2018). While sexual violence is undeniably significant to understand and confront as a society, the avoidance of sexual pleasure leads to an "epistemological respectability" that can chiefly explain this lack of research (Nash 2008: 53) and obscure the ways in which sexuality is also a site for pleasure and empowerment for marginalized groups (Cooper 2018; Jones 2018). In an effort to better understand sexual pleasure in their lives and shift the focus to positive sexual experiences, I described how women conceptualize sexual pleasure as "partner," "purpose," or "process." These accounts indicated that sexual pleasure is complex, multi-faceted, and variable, and these findings disrupt the silence surrounding African-American women's sexual pleasure. This chapter provided an intimate look at the positive sexual experiences of Black women, which offers a unique contribution to the sexualities literature. That is, the sexual risk framework often defines Black women's sexuality and attempts to discipline their sexual pleasure through this "discursive production" (Jones 2018: 643). By discussing the joys of sex, Black women disrupt the "risk" narrative and reclaim their sexuality by drawing attention to how sex can be affirming, satisfying, and pleasurable. This necessarily rounds out the focus in social science research where sexual pleasure is typically absent in studies among marginalized groups.

This dissertation also focused on how Black women respond to racialized sexual stereotypes and manage experiences of stigmatization in Chapter 5. Influenced by stigma

scholars and the literature on "controlling images" of Black sexuality, I showed how respondents contend with pervasive stereotypes that characterize Black women as hypersexual or prude in their social networks and dating experiences. Given that Black women must navigate rocky terrain that distorts their sexuality, this generated a distinct set of strategies to distance themselves from such damaging stereotypes. I found that respondents minimized the salience of stereotypes in their sexual lives, which I argue is a form of color-blind rhetoric (Bonilla-Silva 2004), that creates a sense of agency within the parameters of a white supremacist society. On the other hand, many women acknowledged the salience of stereotypes as directly affecting their sexuality and disclosed preferences to engage in relationship sex (as opposed to casual sex) in order to prevent social repercussions that would reinforce their stigmatized status. However, while a potentially successful strategy to evade negative stereotypes of Black women's sexuality (echoing the "politics of respectability"), it also reinforced gender inequality by constraining women's sexuality to relationships. Therefore, through disavowing and resisting racialized sexual stereotypes, they were complicit to gendered arrangements that expect women to engage in relationship sex. In either strategy, the salience of racialized sexual stereotypes undermined women's self-determination. This chapter highlighted how stereotypes of Black women operated in the women's sexual lives, such as by restricting their sexual expression and relationship formation.

In my last empirical chapter (Chapter 6), I explored how Black women's body image shaped their sexual experiences or *sexual body image*. Prior research has uncritically assumed that Black women are immune to negative body image and have

"cultural buffers" that offer more diversity to inhabit larger body sizes. However, I showed the falseness of this assumption by interrogating how Black women feel about their bodies without presuming the salience of weight to their body image. I offered the concept "thick imperative" to highlight how Black women contend with Black cultural expectations that they possess a curvier body as a marker of Black femininity and racial authenticity. Similar to Bettie's concept of "symbolic economy of style" where the body becomes a site that establishes "race-class specific versions of femininity" hinging on women's attire and bodily adornments (2014: 61-62), "thickness" functions as proof of racial authenticity and belonging. Yet, this marker of racial authenticity interfered with their *sexual body image* which is predicated on the dominant (read: white) society's expectation of thinness. While the dominant literature on body image and sexuality predicts that expectations of thinness interfere with positive sexual experiences (Montemurro and Gillen 2013; Satinsky et al. 2014), my findings critique the prior literature that fails to capture the complexity of Black women's experiences who negotiate two body ideals or "double consciousness" that Du Bois (2005) theorized over a century ago. That is, Black women's body anxieties stemmed from both dominant and cultural expectations that trickle down to their sexual experiences. Additionally, I demonstrated how romantic partner's messages often reinforced expectations of "thickness" that created additional body anxieties. Therefore, Black women are expected to embody multiple and conflicting ideals that often leave them confused, frustrated, and disappointed when they are unable to meet one or both body ideals. I argue that the two, incongruent body ideals situated Black women in a bind, and this bind has implications

for their sexual encounters. Building on intersectionality, I highlighted how race, gender, embodiment, and sexuality interlock to shape Black women's sexual experiences and produce heightened anxieties, taking into account how culture informs their racially-specific body image.

In this dissertation, I wove together experiences of Black women's sexuality that have been underexplored in the literature. My goal for this study was to help researchers re-frame the "risk" narrative deeply invested within the sexualities literature, and instead, generate new ways of thinking about Black women's sexuality that accounts for the spectrum of sexual experiences. I encourage scholars to build on my research and to continue to ask pertinent questions such as:

- What themes do researchers privilege when examining Black women's sexual lives? What sexual stories remain untold?
- What are the theoretical and methodological limitations of intersectionality? How can scholars build on intersectionality to account for within-group experiences?

Additionally, future research should be more attentive to approaches that better support Black women's sexual lives including how to increase sexually affirming experiences. Given the dearth of research around Black women's positive sexual experiences, greater efforts to center sexual pleasure and empowerment are much needed.

In future work, I plan to develop an analysis that examines how colorism, or the societal preference for light skin, shapes Black women and men's sexuality. I intend to understand their dating experiences including how their skin color informs their racial preferences and conversely, their partners' sexual expectations and assumptions linked to

their skin color. Prior research has demonstrated that colorism is gendered (Thompson and Keith 2001) and Black women encounter disadvantages in dating and marriage due to darker-skin (Hunter 2002), who as a group already encounter a race-related "marriage squeeze" regardless of skin color (Chambers and Kravitz 2011; Crowder and Tolnay 2000; Marsh et al. 2007). However, few studies explore how skin color informs women's inter- and intra-racial dating experiences through qualitative methods (Wilder 2010). Furthermore, the historical legacy of slavery and institutionalized racism have constructed Black men as "sexual predators," rendering them as dangerous, hypermasculine, and a threat to society (Collins 2005; Nagel 2003). Therefore, additional research is needed to unpack Black men's sexuality within the context of these broader discourses and how sexual meanings become attached to skin color. This research would build on empirical evidence that African-Americans are particularly isolated within dating (Yancey 2009) to explore how gradations of skin color become sexualized, privileged, and/or disadvantaged and in what contexts. Lastly, this future research would also push racism scholars to complicate racial categories by providing even more accuracy to Black men and women's experiences through exploring within-group differences. I intend to pursue this line of inquiry with in-depth interviews with African-American men and women to better understand the embodiment of sexuality and how racism and racial ideologies are reproduced in social (and intimate) interactions. Understanding their dating stories can inform us about the broader contemporary racial climate in a purportedly "post-racial" or "color-blind" era (Bonilla-Silva 2006).

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**APPENDIX A**

# Your body, your health!

# *A study of sexual health among African-American women*

The Sociology Department of University of California, Riverside is conducting a study on African-American women's body image and sexuality. Are you interested in sharing your personal thoughts and experiences? Tell us about them! Your participation will help to generate a better understanding of African-American women's experiences.

Participation is open to adult (age 18 and older), heterosexual African-American women. Eligibility is limited to women who reside in the Los Angeles metropolitan area, have been sexually active with a partner in the past 6 months, and have been physically active on a consistent basis at some point during the past 6 months in either (1) 150 minutes of moderate-intensity or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity aerobic activity per week or (2) strength training activities 2 or more days a week.

Participation involves an in-person, one- to two-hour interview and a one-page demographic survey to be completed at a time and location of your choosing. The interview covers topics ranging from sexual history and experience, body image, and health. Participants will receive a $25 gift card. Participation in the study is voluntary and confidential.

To participate, please contact sociology graduate student Elizabeth Hughes by email at ehugh001@ucr.edu or by phone at (714) 299-1469. Please indicate in your communication the date(s) and time(s) you are available in the next three weeks. If you are not available in the next three weeks, please suggest an alternate date/time.

## APPENDIX B

## Interview Protocol

Opening Script: During this interview, I'm going to ask you several questions about your sexuality, including your current experiences with sex and how you feel about your body. Some questions will be quite broad and others will be more specific in nature and will ask you to talk about your sexuality and body image in more detailed ways. Please remember that you can choose not to answer any of the questions I ask during the interview.

Body Image and External Messages:

1) Can you describe your ideal body? Probe: appearance (shape, skin color, etc.), physical ability, health

- 1a) Do you feel pressured to attain this ideal body? If so, who or what pressures you? If no, why don't you feel pressured?

2) Healthy means different things to different people. What does healthy mean to you? How would you describe your physical health? Probe: physical appearance or feeling inside

- 2a) Do you have a health condition? If yes, how does your health condition relate to your body image?

3) How do you feel about your body?

- 3a) weight?
- 3b) skin color?
- 3c) physical ability?
- 3d) body shape
- 3e) physical appearance

4) Tell me about a time that you received positive comments about your body.

- 4a) Who gave you the message?
- 4b) What was the situation?
- 4c) How did you feel about the comment?

5) Tell me about a time you received negative comments about your body.

- 5a) Who gave you the message?
- 5b) What was the situation?
- 5c) How did you feel about the comment?

6) Do you receive comments about your body from your current sexual/romantic partner (or from a past sexual/romantic partner)?

- 6a) What are these comments?
- 6b) How do you feel about the comment?

6c) Do you think your body matters to your partner? How so? Probe: race of partner

Sexuality:

7) Now I want to ask you some questions about your sexuality. Women often report different reasons for having sex. There are many reasons why you might have sex with someone. What do you feel are the primary reasons you have sex? Probe: How do you define sex?

7a) How often do you expect to have sex?

7b) What do you expect your partner to do during sex?

7c) In your most recent sexual encounter, was this expectation met? Probe: Is this representative of your sexual history? What is your relationship with this partner?

8) Sometimes women report that they think about their sexuality in terms of "highs" and "lows." Or, many women remember their best and worst sexual experiences. Can you talk about what you consider to be the best sexual experience of your life?
Probe: How did you feel during this experience? What was your relationship with your partner? What type of sexual act(s) did you engage in? How would you describe your partner's sexual performance?

9) Can you talk about what you consider to be the worst sexual experience you've had in your life? This could include an experience that felt coercive or painful. It could also include an experience that felt embarrassing or shameful.
Probe: How did you feel during this experience? What was your relationship with your partner? What type of sexual act(s) did you engage in? How would you describe your partner's sexual performance?

10) I now want to talk about sexual satisfaction and pleasure. Sexual satisfaction and pleasure can be described in several ways. How would you define sexual satisfaction?

10a) What do you consider good or great sex? Probe: Is it important for you to have an orgasm (and why)? Is it important for your partner to have an orgasm (and why)?

10b) What would improve your sexual satisfaction/pleasure?

11) Describe your ideal sex life. Is it different from your current sex life and how so?

11a) What would improve your sex life? Probe: Are you open to casual sexual relationships?

12) Many women report that their desire to have sex and their actual sexual activity sometimes differ. Does this happen to you? Tell me about it.

13) Many women report they agree to have sex with a partner because their partner wants them to. Women often negotiate this in different ways. Can you talk about your experience with this?

Probe: Have you ever been forced or coerced into having sex when you did not want to?
Have you ever felt pressured to have sex?
Who typically initiates sex?
How do you negotiate sexual positions? What are your favorite and least favorite positions?

14) How do you evaluate your own sexual performance? How do you know if you're a good sexual partner?

14a) Can you give me an example?

15) Many women report that their feelings about their own bodies affect their experience of sex. Is that true for you? If yes, how so?

15a) How do you feel about nudity, alone and with your partner? Probe: Do you hide your body during sex? Do you have the lights on during sex?
15b) How do you feel about having sex while menstruating?

16) It is common for women to report that their sexual experiences are affected by circumstances in their lives, such as health, stress, or emotional problems. What kinds of things, if any, have affected your sex life?

17) What are some stereotypes you hear about African-American women's sexuality?

17a) From where/whom did you hear these stereotypes?
17b) Have these stereotypes affected your sexual behavior in any way?

18) Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your sexual experiences and/or body image?

*That concludes our interview. However, before we part, I would like to learn some general information about you. Please complete the one-page demographic survey.*

## APPENDIX C

Demographic Questionnaire

1) How old are you in years today? _____

2) What is the highest level of education that you completed? _____

3) What is your occupation? _____

4) At what age did you first have sex? _____

5) How many sexual partners have you had in your lifetime? _____

6) How many years was your longest sexual relationship? _____

7) What is your current relationship status? _____

7a) How many years/months with partner? _____

7b) What is the race/ethnicity of your partner? _____

8) How would you rate your overall health? (check one)

____ Excellent ____ Very Good ____ Good ____ Fair ____ Poor

*Thank you for your participation.*