

**Respectability, Responsibility, and Resistance: Heterosexual HBCU Women's Negotiations of
Sexuality, Romance, and Sexual Health**

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
(Sociology)
in the University of Michigan
2021

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DEDICATION

“She had my back, supported me. This is the role of the mother, and in that visit I really saw clearly, and for the first time, why a mother is really important. Not just because she feeds and also loves and cuddles and even mollycoddles a child, but because in an interesting and maybe an eerie and unworldly way, she stands in the gap. She stands between the unknown and the known.” Maya Angelou, *Mom & Me & Me and Mom*

To my momma, the late Deborah Dunn Posey
Thank you for standing in the gap for me—in this life and beyond.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My journey to and through this dissertation has been more than intellectual. It's been one of personal, spiritual, and emotional exploration. It's been full of joy, excitement, frustration, and grief. I am eternally grateful to have so many people that have helped me along the way and through a pandemic no less. I haven't enough words to express my love and gratitude for all that you have gifted me.

To the women who generously shared their stories with me, thank you. You are much more than study participants or words on a page—you are women much like those that I love, that I've taught, that I've dreamed with. My hope for you, and Black femmes everywhere, is a world where you are free to desire, love, and be. May we continue to make space to share, imagine, and create together as we work to dismantle the systems that assault us.

I would like to thank my committee for their guidance, support, and investment in my development as a scholar. My dissertation committee chair, Elizabeth Armstrong, was always willing (and excited) to talk through raw ideas, provide feedback on countless drafts, and give career advice. Thank you for sharpening my analytical and writing skills, challenging me to see the broader implications of my work, and helping me craft my research trajectory. I worked with Renee Anspach from my first semester of graduate school as a research assistant and later as a graduate student instructor. Renee, you have been a great source of encouragement, even when I doubted myself. Thank you. It was in Gary Harper's Sexual and Reproductive Health Interventions course that I *knew* that I wanted to be a sexual health scholar and practitioner. Gary, your passion for sexual health and justice and your pedagogy have inspired me more than

you know. Thank you for teaching me how expansive sexual health is and serving as a model to pursue health equity. The first conversation I had with L. Monique Ward validated me as a Black woman scholar, a scholar of Black women, and expanded my ideas about what the study of Black women's sexuality could be. Monique, I feel like my work matters because of you. Thank you for your influence and example. I was lucky to have had Karin Martin as the professor of my first qualitative methods course at Michigan. Karin, thank you for your invaluable lessons in that course, your support throughout my graduate career, and your contributions at this critical juncture.

I could not have made it here without my village. Thank you all for your unwavering love and support during this program and always. Your prayers, affirmations, and manifestations have been my lifeline. I am truly blessed. When I entered Michigan Sociology, I never imagined I'd find so much support in my colleagues. Thank you for your incredible feedback on my research, hallway and computer lab catch-ups, and lunchtime chats on life and sociology. I would like to explicitly acknowledge the Gender & Sexuality workshop, my dissertation group, and my cohort mates Adriana Ponce, Christina Cross, Michael Fang, and Tia Clinton. To Spelman Sociology, thank you for your investment in me as not just a student but a Black woman. Thank you for challenging and affirming me. I would not have considered the Ph.D. if it were not for Dr. Cynthia Neal Spence's nudge. The late Dr. Bruce Wade gave me the courage to forge paths in my research that I otherwise would not have. Dr. Mona Phillips taught me to center Black Feminism in learning, teaching, and doing sociology. I am beyond grateful for my Spelman siblings—many of whom are now or soon-to-be doctor sistas. Thank you, Dr. LeConté Dill, for your mentorship, advice, and reminders to be the kind of scholar and practitioner *I* want and need to be. Thank you, Dunnville, for being my refuge. There are way too many of you to name one

by one. I love you, and I hope that I've made you proud. Let my journey represent possibility for all of the generations that follow. I must explicitly acknowledge the support of my sister Iesha, my dads Johnny and Marcus, my aunt Elaine, and my bestie Briauna. To my niece, Karrington Elise, you are my inspiration for making the world a more equitable place for Black girls and women. I aspire to be as awesome as you think I am. I would like to especially thank my partner, Jereme' Gallier, for the much-needed pep talks, flowers, and coffee chocolate chip gelato to get me through the homestretch. Lastly, thank you, God, for your love, renewal, and promise. It sustained me.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the sexual and romantic experiences of heterosexual undergraduate women enrolled at a Historically Black College/University (HBCU) to provide a broader picture of sex, dating, and sexual vulnerability for Black college women. Drawing on in-depth interviews with thirty Black heterosexual cisgender women, I uncover how racialization and gendering of sexualities shape emerging middle-class women's negotiations of sex, romance, and sexual health.

This study is guided by three related research questions: (1) In what ways does the sexual landscape of HBCUs inform racialized, classed, and gendered repertoires for sexual practice? (2) How do race, class, and gender inequities shape HBCU women's sexual experiences and expectations? and (3) In what ways do women's negotiations of sex, sexual health, and romance resist and reinforce existing inequities in heterosexual encounters?

In the first article, "'We Want Relationships': Romantic Aspirations and HBCU Women's Performances of Race, Class, and Gender," I explore the pursuit of heterosexual romance and sex as an integral part of the HBCU collegiate experience and elite Black female identity. The women considered committed monogamous relationships the ideal context for fulfilling their sexual and romantic desires during matriculation. However, they faced obstacles to achieving these relationships. Efforts to accomplish a particular heteronormative Black middle-class gender performance in the face of limited access to the aligned relationship structure complicated women's negotiations of sex and romance.

The second article, “In Pursuit of Power Coupling: Heterosexual Women’s Navigations of Sex, Romance, and Sexual Health at HBCUs,” identifies three main strategies HBCU women deployed to navigate this tension within a matrix of domination that shapes sexual and social vulnerabilities. This article considers the possibilities and limitations of sexual agency as both a means to resolve this bind and a force that challenges the ideological constraints of Black middle-class female sexuality.

The final article, “‘Keep Your Eyes Open’: HBCU Women’s Peer Sexual Advice and the (Re)production of Vigilance,” reveals how dominant discourses surrounding Black women’s problematized sexualities are taken up, resisted, and reinforced. Through peer sexual advice, HBCU women construct vigilance as central to their sexualities. They explain the responsibility of Black college women to protect themselves from sexual health risk and to establish respectable sexual identities.

This study of how HBCU women negotiate their sexuality has implications for understanding racialized class and gender performances more generally. Further, this work highlights the significance of institutional context and racial, classed, and gendered locations for college heterosexuality and sexual health scholarship. I demonstrate the need for public health approaches rooted in Black feminism that focus on the fullness of Black women’s sexual lives and how systems of power impact it. Lastly, HBCUs are centered as a critical site for the study of Black collegiate life and addressing intersectional inequities.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

SITUATING SEXUALITY

Romance and sex are considered rites of passage in emerging adulthood. Despite the seemingly individual nature of sexuality, it is constructed and arranged by an array of historical, cultural, and structural factors (Weeks 2002). Further, sexual practices and politics are fundamental for social organization. Meanings attached to sexuality have defined normalcy, legitimize othering, and constitute power relations (Collins 2004). Understandings of sexuality and intimate life as natural remain central to the (re)production of intersectional inequities.

Social constructionist, queer, and feminist sociologists have conceptualized sexuality as both a free-standing system and an entity manipulated within distinctive systems of oppression such as race, class, and gender. Shifts in understandings of sexuality from biological to socially constituted power relations are foundational to these approaches, which challenge the hegemony of heterosexuality (Collins 2002; Foucault 1978; Rubin [1984] 1993). The first perspective positions sexuality as a distinct system of oppression similar to sexism, racism, and classism. A binary is constructed by categorizing heterosexuality as *the* normal and acceptable form of sexual expression and declaring all others deviant and unnatural. Heterosexism serves as the basis for organizing social relations and structures that confer privilege and status based on adherence to these norms and degradation of those who do not. Assumptions of heterosexuality, though used to marginalize individuals and groups across multiple realms of social life, become so deeply embedded in ideology that they are often uninterrogated. Social, cultural, and

institutionalized practices and meanings act as social control to reinforce heterosexism and denote citizenship—classifying those who belong and those who do not—based on sexual practice (Foucault 1978; Josephson 2016).

The latter perspective articulates how the contours of race, class, and gender oppression operate with/in heterosexist assumptions. While analytically distinct, each of these organizing structures reinforces and is reinforced by sexuality. For example, gender relations, including prescriptions of femininity and masculinity, support heterosexuality through the presentation and meanings of sexual desire, practice, and identities. Likewise, sexuality sustains gender performance, identity, and subjugation through sexual arrangements that legitimize and naturalize heteromale dominance. The monogamous couple as a critical feature of heterosexism supports a supposedly natural gender binary and the constructed relationship between heteromale and heterofemininity (Schippers 2016). The basis and naturalization of racial categories are also firmly rooted in the perception and construction of difference—physiologically, morally, and sexually. Controlling sexuality has been vital to preserving racial boundaries and white supremacy (Collins 2002). The so-called sexual deviance of minoritized racial and ethnic groups has worked for the purpose of racial othering and justification of their oppression. Resulting ideology has aided in the exploitation and commodification of these groups for capitalistic endeavors. Sexuality, in late capitalism, is central to the political-economic sphere wherein governmental policies position the hegemonic heterosexual, white, patriarchal family as legitimate and deny others full citizenship on this basis (Josephson 2016; Rogers 2012). As an economic system, capitalism relies on the social reproduction of labor power, which relies on the heterosexual normative family and the control of sexuality inside and outside of this structure (Butler [1997] 2008). Sexual regulation works to (re)constitute

heterosexuality through the abjection of “non-normative” sexuality and establishing the heterosexual monogamous male-dominated family structure. Abating

Further, sexuality can serve as a site of intersectionality, a “conceptual glue” connecting intersecting oppressions, demonstrating how they converge in social practice (Collins 2002:135). Collins’ conceptualization provides this paradigm as a tool to further the study of power and inequity. Thus, this dissertation is guided by an intersectional approach to sexuality which challenges monocategorical analyses to consider how systems overlap and constitute one another.

The study of Black¹ women’s sexuality, in particular, offers an opportunity to examine individual and group experiences when systems of power and oppression collide across various axes. Additional research on Black women’s sexual lives through sex-positive, Black feminist, and counter normative lens is necessary to expand the scope of literature in this area and emphasize the significance of Black intimate life for social justice (Hargons et al. 2018). Black women’s sexuality has been a source for a host of societal anxieties and fantasies in the American imagination—it is paradoxically hyper-visible, invisible, and subject to misrepresentation. This objectification has been elemental to our subjugation. More dominant groups hold power to define social and cultural values and control ideas around race, gender, class, and sexuality by exploiting existing notions about them or creating new ones (Collins 2004). Controlling images are one demonstration of this. For example, Black women have been depicted as promiscuous “Jezebels” and more recently as “Freaks” and “Baby’s Mamas” (Stephens and Phillips 2005). The antithesis of these hypersexualized images is the desexualized Mammy, who appeals to the white gaze as non-threatening (Collins 2002).

¹ I use the terms *African-American*, *Black*, *Black American* interchangeably as participants have identified themselves in these racial and ethnic categories.

These race and class-based images of Black womanhood influence perceptions of Black female sexuality, obscure the fullness of Black women's sexual and romantic lives and frame how Black women consider our sexual subjectivity. Moreover, they reflect the organization of Black women's domination through reifying our outsider status. Controlling images work to connect hegemonic ideologies and structure inequity across and within power systems, placing Black women at the lowest rung of the social ladder. These seemingly natural conceptions and practices around sexuality are produced and upheld through social institutions, policy, and media.

Constructions of racialized gender that fuel these (mis)representations of Black womanhood are rooted in chattel slavery and continue to cast a shadow on Black women's sexuality (Collins 2004; Roberts 1999; Staples 2006). Enslaved African women endured capitalistic exploitation via reproductive labor to build the burgeoning institution and as a means for white men's enactment of race and gender power. Black women held no autonomy to their bodies and sexuality or were granted protection based on gender status. Their degraded racial status prevented access to hegemonic (white) femininity, solidifying them as both gender and racial others, that is neither like Black men nor white women.

The regime regulating Black women continues in the contemporary through policy and discourse that problematizes our sexuality and reinforces hegemonic race, gender, class, and sexual ideals (Roberts 1999). Policy has sought to address what are considered flawed patterns in partnering and sexual practice among Black people. The 1965 report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, commonly known as the Moynihan Report, characterized the female-headed family structures of low-income Black families as unstable, dysfunctional, and a barrier to Black Americans' progress (US Department of Labor, n.d.). Black Americans' supposed

refusal or inability to form nuclear families continues to serve as a scapegoat for the economic and social conditions faced by Black communities and the “crises” that accompany them. Ideologies of problematic Black sexuality have persisted in federal assistance programs for poor and working-class Americans that promote two-parent marital households and seek to prevent “illegitimacy.” Yet, these recommendations often fail to recognize barriers Black Americans have faced in the legal and social recognition of family and relationship formations since slavery and the lingering effects of the institution on partnering (Hunter 2017). Additionally, family research and policy efforts that position white nuclear families as normative, pathologize Black families, overlook the strengths of various other family structures, and do not address the impact of systemic racism on economic mobility (Bloome 2014; Cross, Taylor, and Chatters 2018; Mosley-Howard and Evans 2000).

The construction of Black female sexuality as “risky” and in need of regulation is also apparent in public health discourse, research, and intervention efforts (Lewis 2004). With regard to Black women’s sexuality, the vast majority of public health and social science literature has taken a deficit approach that identifies Black women’s ignorance and poor sexual decision-making as the primary cause for sexual outcomes such as unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, particularly HIV (Fasula, Carry, and Miller 2014; Hargons et al. 2020; McGruder 2009). However, existing research has demonstrated that Black women do not differ significantly from white women in a range of sexual risk behaviors, such as engaging in condomless and having multiple sexual partners (Tillerson 2008). Still, Black women and girls continue to be targeted for sexual health interventions to reduce risk by changing their behaviors (Ware, Thorpe, and Tanner 2019). These efforts draw on and reinforce problematic hypersexualized notions of Black women by focusing on individual behavior and obscuring the

contexts in which sexual activity occurs and how social inequity shapes vulnerability (Bay-Cheng 2018). Further, such approaches contribute to negative, unbalanced assessments of Black women's sexuality, inhibit comprehensive and normative understandings of Black women's sexual experience, and limit the scope of sexual health promotion which should embrace sexual satisfaction, subjectivity, pleasure, and desire (Hammonds 2004, Hargons et al. 2020; Jones 2021; World Health Organization 2006).

Popular culture, too, is fixated on investigating and addressing the supposedly abysmal state of Black women's sexual and romantic endeavors. Particular attention has shifted the primary focus from the "baby's mama," who is often read as poor or working-class, to discussions of the "unmarriageable professional Black woman" (Erigha 2018; Stephens and Phillips 2003; Wanzo 2011). These discourses facilitate the construction of singlehood as dysfunctional and undesirable (Moorman 2020). Moreover, it is used to bolster claims of heterosexual Black women's inability or unwillingness to adhere to appropriate gender and sexuality as the reason for "flawed" Black love relationships and erases queer Black women's sexuality altogether (Collins 2002). For example, Hurt et al. (2013) explored married Black men's opinions on why Black women experience singlehood at disproportionate rates reflected these sentiments. They reported that men overwhelmingly cite women's approaches to dating and men as misguided and the "too strong" Black woman as a barrier for relationship formation. The study itself seemingly aligns with the premise that singlehood is an unwanted state for Black women though some research has challenged this assumption (Moorman 2020). Further, it grants undue authority to Black men concerning Black women's romantic and sexual lives.

Likewise, scores of self-proclaimed relationship gurus—commonly Black men—amass large followings telling heterosexual Black women what they are doing wrong in their sexual

lives by essentializing gender and promoting patriarchal rules for sex (Charleston 2014). For example, Steve Harvey's *Act Like a Lady, Think Like a Man: What Men Really Think About Love, Relationships, Intimacy, and Commitment* advises women on how to conduct themselves in accordance with patriarchal value systems to secure a marriage proposal, including withholding sex for 90 days (Harvey 2009). This book became a New York Times Bestseller with a sequel and two film adaptations. Through conferences, books, social media, and sermons, relationship theology frames heterosexual marriage as a coveted prize and preaches singleness as a consequence of heterosexual Black women's failure to be submissive and sexually pious (Moultrie 2017). Black women are urged to contort themselves to fit into restrictive (white) gender expectations to prove themselves worthy of love and romance.

Moreover, Black women are often muffled in considerations of our intimate lives (Collins 2004; Rose 2003). Yet the message is clear that Black women have themselves and their abhorrent sexuality to blame for the injustices faced in romance and sex. Extant research has demonstrated the consequences of oppressive structures on attitudes, beliefs, and approaches to Black womanhood and sexuality. A substantial amount has explicitly focused on the influence of the Jezebel image and its modern permutations (Stephens and Phillips 2003). Scholars have demonstrated both endorsements and rejections of this depiction among Black women across age ranges and the consequences for sexual self-perceptions and decision-making (Brown, White-Johnson, and Griffin-Fennell 2013; Crooks et al. 2019; Davis and Tucker-Brown 2013). For instance, Jerald (2018) found that Black college women's awareness of such racialized gendered metastereotypes contributes to increased sexual monitoring, which is associated with key aspects of sexual well-being such as agency, inhibition, and risk. Likewise, other studies have demonstrated how this hypersexualized image of Black womanhood leaves Black women feeling

disempowered in intimate relationships, discouraged from learning safer sex practices and information, and generally adapting sexual behaviors and presentation (Bond et al. 2021; Leathe et al. 2021)

Nonetheless, we create pockets of resistance by continuing to fight for the right to self-definition, combat pathologization of our sexualities, and seek to move ourselves from the margins (Thompson 2009). Black American cinema, literature, television, music, and increasingly digital spaces are at the helm of challenging one-dimensional representations and offering complex depictions of Black sexuality (Erigha 2018, Morgan 2000, Pickens 2014). HBO series *Insecure*, with Black woman Issa Rae as creator and creative director, is one example that harnesses opportunities for self-representation that confronts racialized gender stereotypes while offering counter-narratives for sexuality, sex, and romance (Levey 2020; Ohman 2020). Similarly, through song lyrics, music video imagery, and digital engagement, Black women hip-hop artists, such as Megan Thee Stallion, subvert existing racialized gender expectations and hypersexualized conceptions of Black sexuality while asserting autonomy over their representations to reimagine Black womanhood (Green 2020; Jennings 2020; Khong 2020). In many respects, media has diversified the depictions of Black women and our sexualities in resistant manners, though upholding hegemonic ideals in other ways. It has been theorized that Black media portraying sexually empowered, agentic Black women contests existing heteropatriarchal structures. In theory, this could facilitate shifts in sexual and romantic behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes; however, this assertion has yet to be supported (Avery et al. 2021).

Further social science inquiry that centers our subjectivity is a necessary Black Feminist intervention to disrupt our marginalization and challenge racist, classist, and misogynistic

systems that silence and subjugate Black women. Black women scholars have been instrumental in developing literature that aims to humanize Black people, our sexualities, and our love relationships. Rose's (2003) groundbreaking book confronts "politics of silence" around sex by sharing in-depth stories about Black women's sexual lives across age, class, and sexual orientation. Dogan et al. (2018) challenge deficient approaches to Black sex and relationships through exploring intimacy in Black collegians' sexual narratives. This current work follows these examples through a counter normative approach that engages the process by which Black women's analyses of the social world, extrapolated from their own and others' experiences, are produced within the matrix of domination and influence how we believe we should navigate it. In this work, I problematize the hegemony of heterosexual monogamy and the implications for Black women's sexual lives and health.

The experiences of Black women are best understood through the lens of race, class, gender, and sexuality as co-constituting systems (Collins 2002; Crenshaw 1991). This dissertation draws on intersectionality as both a theoretical approach and an approach to empirical research that emphasizes the interacting effects of structures for Black women's sexual lives. In this study, I employ an intracategorical or group-centered approach that focuses on the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality within a single social group to examine inequity and resistance (Choo and Feree 2010; McCall 2005). Placing heterosexual Black women at the center of analyses represents a departure from observing power systems separately to examining how simultaneous privilege and disadvantage manifest in their sexual lives. For example, while heterosexual Black women experience privilege based on their heterosexuality, their sexual practice is subject to problematization because of their subordinated gender, racial, and often class statuses.

Further, the current research seeks to broaden sociological understandings of heterosexuality and how Black women's positions within heterosexism and other power systems are linked and specified through their relations to different social groups. Much sociological work on Black women's heterosexuality creates us as a homogenous group. In these analyses, race is situated as the primary organizing structure for Black women's sexual and romantic lives. This approach assumes that class holds little influence for Black women in sex, relationships, and family formation, though that assertion has not been well established (Burton and Tucker 2009; Ford 2018).

Conversely, demographic studies of college-educated women in these areas often fail to elaborate how racialization and racism contribute to significant differences in these processes (Clarke 2011). Because class and racial hierarchies are mutually constituted, the conflation of middle-class with whiteness, with advantages of both, and the presumption that being Black means being poor, thus universally disadvantage, are not uncommon. Middle-class Black womanhood is simultaneously crafted by racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism; thus, social processes shaped by these power systems must be considered simultaneously. Instructions for identity construction seek to reconcile the supposed incongruences of their race and class status. Thus, middle-class Black women provide an important yet overlooked vantage point for considering how intersectional oppressions and identity performance meet.

I draw on sociologists' characterizations of the Black middle-class as constituting a social, in addition to an economic, category with distinct social practices (Lacy 2007; Pattillo [1999] 2013). This dissertation's focus on Black collegians makes class aspirations through educational status most salient. With college as a gateway institution for class acculturation and postsecondary degree as the primary criteria for middle-class status, some women in the sample

seek upward class mobility. In contrast, others with college-educated parents seek class reproduction through self-presentation and identity formation.

Race remains salient for the Black middle-class, partly because of how profound racial categorization continues to be in the organization of our lives. Further, Black identities are a source of pride; Black Americans enjoy connections to other Black people and cultures. Thus, for middle-class Blacks, establishing and maintaining racial authenticity is key (Lacy 2007; Lareau 2011). In the contemporary context where de jure segregation is now unconstitutional, this is done through middle-class Black Americans' concerted efforts to preserve ties to Black spaces and organizations despite increased access into mainstream predominantly white spaces. The preoccupation of middle-class Blacks to make racialized class identities reflects the tradition of Black leaders and scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth century who advocated for the advancement of Black Americans through education and class mobility. For example, Du Bois (1903) designated the responsibility of degreed Black woman and men, as the "talented tenth," to serve as role models for the race who uphold the highest virtues and set standards to promote racial progress.

Middle-class Black women hold a specific role in policing appropriate behavior. Black middle-class women's gender performance is tied to racial uplift aimed at revising notions of Black people and Black gender as immoral and abnormal and promoting racial progress. The cult of true womanhood, a 19th-century ideology that dictated middle and upper-class white women's conduct, was most informative for a deliberate performance of Black ladyhood (Thompson 2009). Therefore, the foundation of middle-class Black womanhood rests on embodying and regulating "politics of respectability," tenets to resist negative racial stereotypes and demonstrate moral character, as a survival strategy against racism and to advance Black Americans

(Higginbotham 1993; White 2001). These principles established strict gender expectations for Black women with the hope of positioning them as worthy of respect by aligning themselves with white gender ideals, thus protecting them from the victimization of white America due to their racial status.

Still, Black middle-class womanhood seeks to challenge dominant representations of Black women as promiscuous and irresponsible in the public imagination, discourse, and policy. Presenting oneself as a “Black lady” requires complex negotiations through adhering to conservative sexual standards and suppressing sexual agency in favor of propriety (Collins 2002, 2004; Thompson 2009). Black respectability politics simultaneously resist the white supremacist creation and problematization of Black sexuality *and* is a race-specific manifestation of heterosexism and heteropatriarchal family structures (Schippers 2016). Middle-class Black women’s embodiments of respectability become the standard by which appropriate Black femininity is assessed. Hence, a dialectic between the “good” and “bad” Black woman is established based on self-presentation.

Middle-class Black women’s sexuality compels critical attention to how their endorsements and performances at once engage and challenge dominant practice and meanings of sexuality, race, gender, and class. However, the standpoints of cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class Black women are only one “angle of vision” (Collins 2002:39). Because the matrix of domination holds multiple groups, each with varying crosscutting positions of privilege and oppression and experiences shaped by those, this dissertation provides a partial perspective of Black women’s sexual lives. As subjects with simultaneous advantage and disadvantage, the complexities of power relations, hegemony, and resistance all influence Black women’s constructions of self and self-presentation through sex and romance.

A DIFFERENT WORLD?: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SEXUALITY IN THE HBCU CONTEXT

Space remains critical to the study of inequity. Sites of interaction provide a crucial context for identity, performance, and power. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are at the core of Black middle-class identity construction, performance, and resistance to anti-Black racism. HBCUs were founded specifically to educate Black Americans when we were generally denied admission to historically white institutions (HWIs). Their establishment was made possible through the efforts of Black churches, formerly enslaved Black Americans, and white missionaries to train Black preachers, teachers, and other members of the community before and immediately following the Civil War (Harper, Patton, Wooden 2009). The second Morrill Act of 1890 required states to designate land grants to establish Black schools if admission was not allowed to Black students elsewhere, particularly in formerly Confederate states, resulting in the founding of many of our nation's public HBCUs (Matthews 2008). More than ninety institutions were established by the turn of the twentieth century when many schools began to focus on Black intellectual thought in addition to trades.

There are over 100 HBCUs, public and private, across the continental United States and the Virgin Islands, with the majority located in the South. Though HBCUs make up only 3 percent of the nation's postsecondary institutions, they enroll 10 percent of all Black students and produce approximately 20 percent of Black college graduates (United Negro College Fund n.d.). HBCUs remain vital to Black communities and culture, with about one-third of institutions reporting dramatic increases in admissions applications and enrollment over the last few years (Williams and Palmer 2019). While HBCUs play a significant role in educating the children of affluent and middle-class Blacks, these institutions are also considered engines for upward

mobility by graduating a large proportion of poor and working-class Black Americans. In addition, the majority of HBCUs report at least two-thirds of enrolled students as Pell Grant recipients (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education 2010). About 50 percent of all undergraduates at the field site were Pell-eligible at the time of this study. HBCUs thus continue to solidify their long-held position for the cultivation of collective Black identity and racialized classed identity formation (Grundy 2012).

There is also a more covert curriculum at play in this development—equipping the emerging Black middle-class with strategies for confronting an anti-Black world. HBCUs socialize their students to exemplify the antithesis of negative racial stereotypes used to subjugate Black Americans. Principles of Black respectability contribute to class indoctrination through tactics that urge distinction from “others”—poor and working-class Black people. These ideologies are deeply entangled with promotions of heteronormativity and patriarchy as a means of demonstrating normalcy and alignment with white hegemonic ideals.

Black respectability, though well-intentioned, works to maintain an existing racial order and reconstitute intersecting systems of power and hierarchies along the lines of gender, class, and sexuality (Collins 2004). Institutional policies and codes of conduct outline and call for respectable self-presentations from the predominately Black student body. Thus, not *all* Black students find HBCUs to be safe havens, as these practices restrict self-definition and expression and create chilly climates for women, queer, and many other students at the nexus of race and another system of oppression (Mobley and Johnson 2019; Njoku, Butler, and Beatty 2017).

HBCUs have gained media attention for stringent “dress” policies that regulate sexuality, race, and gender self-presentation. For example, Hampton University’s dress code forbids women from wearing caps, hoods, or headwraps on campus, requiring written requests to wear

religious headdresses (Hampton University 2021). In addition, the university's Business School dean prohibited cornrows and locs for male students enrolled in a leadership seminar within the five-year MBA program (Njoku, Butler, and Beatty 2017). Morehouse College, the nation's only postsecondary institution for the education of Black men, instituted a ban against "the wearing of clothing associated with women's garb," including heels, makeup, purses, and dresses (Mobley and Johnson 2019; Patton 2014). Sagging pants, du-rags, and mouth grills were also barred. Bennett College, one of two historically Black women's colleges in the nation, has guidelines that call for skirts or dresses to be no higher than three inches above the knee and clothing that does not reveal tattoos. The code also notes that Bennett Belles are "never fully dressed without a smile" (Bennett College 2016:51).

Housing policies regulate student conduct by requiring first-year students to reside on campus, establishing curfews, limiting guests within residence halls, and claiming visitation as a privilege that may be revoked individually or as a campus or hall collective. Spelman College and Clark Atlanta University, for example, allow in-room visits for an approximately six-hour period on a given evening and limit overnight stays to same-sex guests for an allotted number per semester (Clark Atlanta University 2021; Spelman College 2019). In addition, Tuskegee University's visitation policy limits visitation from members of the opposite sex to public visitation areas, such as the residence hall lounge (Tuskegee University 2017).

These policies demonstrate a desire to care for students' well-being and facilitate mainstream success, which is challenging due to negative perceptions of Blackness. But they keep Black collegians under tight regulation, restrain self-definition, and endorse restrictive and often racist, sexist, heterosexist, transphobic, and classist parameters for achievement. These rigid campus rules reflect staff and administrators' role as guardians of their institutional image

and the images of the emerging Black middle-class through compelling what are considered appropriate racial and class performances.

HBCUs provide distinct cultural repertoires or toolkits that Black collegians use to inform understandings and lines of action for the performance of racial, classed, and gendered self-presentations (Brown, Donahoo, and Bertrand 2001; Swidler 1986). Institutional orientations toward success frame propriety as essential to individual mobility and racial advancements. Further, this constructed campus culture undoubtedly shapes Black collegians' approaches to sexuality and works to structure HBCU women's sexual possibilities through the endorsement of specific racialized gender and class performances.

Though motivation for investigating HBCU student experience is warranted, such studies remain underrepresented in social science literature. The marginalization of minority-serving institutions, including HBCUs, in research, national discourse, and policymaking demonstrates the continued impact of systematic racism in the landscape of higher education (Wooten 2015). Failure to acknowledge them as significant players for the educational, social, and economic advancement of Black communities reflects a legacy of assimilationist practices that devalue non-white institutions and render them irrelevant in the era of colorblind racism. The current study does not aim to essentialize, provide comparisons with HWIs, or frame HBCUs as a monolith. Instead, I seek to emphasize HBCUs as meaningful spaces for studying Black collegiate life and power. These institutions were established with a commitment to centering Black students and strengthening Black communities, and they are fundamental for combatting intersectional inequities. The culture and context of HBCUs as prominent Black spaces for the cultivation of Black identities and racial advancement make them critical sites to investigate

manifestations and resistance of oppression in the lives of emerging middle-class Black American adults.

Using thirty in-depth interviews, my dissertation examines the romantic and sexual experiences of cisgender, heterosexual Black women at an HBCU in the southern United States. I argue that HBCU women's pursuits of sex, romance, and sexual health are racialized, classed, and gendered practices that both reinforce and challenge existing social hierarchies. Women's sexual projects are molded by this microcosm that promotes respectability and by broader society that problematizes Black sexuality (Hirsch and Khan 2020). Though sexual exploration is a hallmark and an expectation of the collegiate experience, heterosexual HBCU women manage their sexual lives within restrictive frameworks of appropriate racialized, classed, and gendered sexuality. These navigations must be consistent with and in service to broader commitments to crafting an elite Black female identity. This research elaborates sexual projects as a route to self-definition and social status (Hirsch and Khan 2020). These undertakings are about the kind of woman HBCU women are told they should be and aim to become. Communications they receive from their HBCU and elsewhere about what sex is for, and the associated meanings of sexuality promote regulation of sexual behavior and desires in ways that reflect and reproduce conceptions of racialized risk, gendered sexuality, and class distinction. In their bid to challenge anti-Black racism, accomplish middle-class status, and perform appropriate gender, young Black women hold themselves and their peers to impossible standards by which to navigate the matrix of domination unscathed. Yet, as a consequence, their possibilities for sexual health and freedom are constrained.

SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS

This dissertation seeks to better understand how young heterosexual Black women's sexual lives are influenced by the entanglements of racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism. "Respectability, Responsibility, and Resistance" explores how HBCU women contend with intersectional inequities in pursuit of sex, romance, and sexual health. In three articles, I highlight the significance of HBCUs to investigate the racialization and gendering of sexuality and how systems of power converge for Black women seeking class mobility in a Black space. Through a focus on HBCU sexual landscapes, I underscore how a particular institutionalized response to anti-Black racism, rooted in respectability politics and racial uplift, shapes the sexual challenges Black women face and their agentic racialized and classed sexuality and gender performances.

In the second chapter, I describe the methodological approach of this dissertation. I explain the ways in which I used Black feminist thought, intersectionality, and phenomenology as key frameworks to design the study design, conduct ethical research that centered the lived experiences of HBCU women, and guide data analysis. Additionally, I reflect on the challenges and advantages that accompanied my insider-outsider status as an HBCU alumna and a Black feminist researcher interviewing Black women throughout the research process.

The third chapter of the dissertation, "'We Want Relationships': Romantic Aspirations and HBCU Women's Performances of Race, Class, and Gender," examines heterosexual HBCU women's relationship desires and their implications for sexual and social identities. HBCU women describe characteristics of an ideal mate and partnership that fulfill the relational aspect of an elite Black female identity. Women seek committed, monogamous, equitable relationships defined as an ideal context to fulfill their romantic and sexual desire and maintain social status.

Nonetheless, women express barriers to obtaining this relationship structure. Consequently, women must negotiate available opportunities in ways that adhere to appropriate gendered and classed sexuality. In doing this, they navigate a campus environment where their sexual dealings are highly surveilled by others to promote propriety, where gendered power dynamics challenge their agency, and where a mismatch in Black collegiate men's relational desires decreases access to partners for appropriate racialized gender and class performance.

Women's pursuits of Black middle-class womanhood through "power coupling" highlight processes whereby negotiations of sexuality and romance both sustain and challenge gender, class, and racial structures. Chapter 4, "In Pursuit of Power Coupling: Heterosexual Women's Navigations of Sex, Romance, and Sexual Health at an HBCU," identifies three main strategies HBCU women employ to navigate the tensions between their relational desires and the treacherous sexual terrain. The first strategy, *opting out*, reflects women's shift to dating off-campus as a response to the constraints, risks, and dissatisfaction with their HBCU landscape. In the second strategy, some women *pay to play* the game of dating and sex on campus by relying on race, gender, and class-based notions of appropriate sexuality shaped by their institutional arrangements. In the third strategy, HBCU women aim to *call the shots* by pursuing sexual agency to protect their sexual health and their claims to respectable Black middle-class womanhood. HBCU women seek to negotiate their sexualities and mediate social and sexual risks within narrow constructions of appropriate racialized gender and class sexualities. Dilemmas arise as women draw on one strategy or another to navigate the matrix of domination. Women generally did not secure the romantic and sexual involvements they desire through these diverse strategies.

In chapter 5, “‘Keep Your Eyes Open’: HBCU Women’s Peer Sexual Advice and the (Re)production of Vigilance,” I turn my attention to how women engage discourse around Black women’s sexuality in the face of sexual health inequities. Through advice to hypothetical first-year HBCU students, the women in the sample construct vigilance as elemental to Black college women’s sexualities. Safe-sex rhetoric, racialized risk narratives, and Black femininity converge to frame how women consider their roles and the roles of women like them in maintaining their sexual health and social status. The overarching messages reveal gender-specific expectations about sexual responsibility through self-reliance, and respectability through heterosexual monogamy. HBCU women position themselves and their sexualities as respectable to resist their objectification. However, women’s advice upholds binary oppositions wherein being a “good” Black woman hinges on adherence to sexual standards shaped by racist, classist, sexist, and heterosexist assumptions. I argue that the behavioral construction of risk is particularly detrimental to Black women as it obscures the impact of systematic injustice on Black women’s sexual subjectivity and health. As a result, Black women are compelled to protect themselves from socially structured risks.

Taken together, these articles demonstrate how pervasive social inequity, constructed campus cultures, and Black middle-class gender ideology structure heterosexual HBCU women’s sexual possibilities and vulnerabilities. In the sixth and final chapter of this dissertation, I discuss the sociological implications of these findings, including the contributions to existing scholarship on the sociology of gender, race, and the reproduction of intersectional inequities in college heterosexuality. Additionally, I consider implications for public health scholarship and practice, arguing for a reorientation toward sexual health promotion that centers racial and gender justice. Lastly, I discuss further research directions, including the need for

ethnographic work to investigate the construction and deployment of sexual curricula through HBCUs' institutional practices.

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CHAPTER 2

Methodology

STUDY DESIGN

Reflective of my intersectional and Black feminist theoretical orientations, the study design, data collection, and analysis for this dissertation were rooted in a phenomenological paradigm that explores HBCU women's sexual experiences and how they understand those experiences within a matrix of domination (Bowleg 2017; Schultz 1967). These broader epistemologies inform empirical work that centers and empowers marginalized groups' voices, reveals the often contradictory manifestations of power structures, and seeks to advance social justice (Bowleg 2021; Dill and Zambrana 2009; Rice, Harrison, and Friedman 2019). This dissertation expands the scope of existing college heterosexuality and sexual health literature through an intersectional study that centers the experiences of Black college women who remain marginalized in these areas of research. Intersectionality and Black feminist thought equipped me with tools to execute a normative study of Black women's sexual lives that critiques deficit approaches to sexual health promotion rooted in white supremacist, heterosexist, and classist assumptions (Barcelos 2018; McGruder 2009). Additionally, this work endorses comprehensive sexual health promotion that engages the context in which heterosexual behavior occurs and advocates for holistic approaches to collegiate sexual health.

The interest of this work was to generate a more complete picture of sexual and romantic experiences *within* this group in a particular institutional context. My focus on individuals whose

social locations lie at the intersection of the same dimension of multiple categories— in this case, race, gender, sexuality, and aspirant class— reflected what McCall (2005) calls an intracategorical approach to intersectionality. Using this approach, I aimed to emphasize the standpoint of the participants as one “angle of vision” without essentializing Black women’s sexual and romantic experiences (Collins 2002, Few 2007). While I used existing social categories to define subjects of analysis, this research recognized that these categories are not entirely static or merely variables. Instead, I engaged the ways in which these slow-moving categorizations have organized HBCU women’s lives, how understandings of race, class, gender, and sexuality informed identity-making projects, and how the impact of their intersecting power structures shaped women’s sexual and romantic opportunities (Moore 2011).

My sample consisted of 30 cisgender heterosexual Black women enrolled as undergraduates at a Historically Black College/University (see Tables 1, 2, and 3 for participant characteristics). Following the example of many studies of postsecondary institutions, I chose not to reveal the field site’s name for two reasons (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013, Jack 2019, Turner 2019). The first was to increase confidentiality. I sought to protect the study participants’ identities by first using pseudonyms for the women, removing potential identifiers, and finally masking the field site. However, I must be honest that these efforts are no guarantee. Though all the women in this sample are no longer undergraduates at Hillman, HBCUs’ close-knit alumni networks could make identification more possible with an institutional name and information such as named affiliations with sororities and student leadership positions (Grundy 2021). Second, the sexual and romantic experiences shared are likely not isolated to the Black women at this institution or this sample, given the pervasiveness of intersectional inequities that impact collegiate dating and sex (Anakaraonye et al. 2019; Clark 2011; Hall and Tanner 2016). While

the particularities of Hillman are not entirely insignificant, aspects of its constructed campus environment are shared by many HBCUs (see Chapter 1). Therefore, the stories of the women in the pages that follow may be informative for heterosexual women's negotiations of sex and romance at other HBCUs and university contexts and should be read as such.

My epistemological approach acknowledges the power of names and naming (Lahman et al. 2015). I carefully selected pseudonyms for participants with this in mind. I wanted pseudonyms to convey a sense of authenticity based on participants' racial/ethnic origin, gender, and age. To accomplish this, I reviewed popular baby name websites and searched under the categories of "popular African American baby girl names" and "popular Black baby girl names." I cross-referenced the Social Security Administration website's data on the most popular names within the five-year period participants were born.

Likewise, I selected the field site's pseudonym from a significant American popular culture reference. Hillman College is a fictional HBCU introduced as the alma mater of obstetrician Dr. Heathcliff and his wife attorney, Claire Huxtable, on *The Cosby Show*, a successful primetime sitcom that premiered in the 1980s. Hillman was the setting of its spinoff, *A Different World*, a sitcom about Black collegiate life which was also heavily syndicated. The Huxtables were both criticized and celebrated for their portrayal of a respectable, "exceptional" upper-middle-class Black family (Jhally and Lewis 1992; Stamps 2017). Further, they were revered as the gold standard of Black romantic possibility with their HBCU as a critical component of their story. These shows' positive depictions of Black life, love, and institutions permeated popular culture when representations of Black families in media were, and remain, few (Matabane and Merritt 2014). The women in my sample were not yet born during the years

that the show originally aired. Yet, many of them referenced the Huxtables as the prototype for their professional and personal lives.

Like the fictional college, my field site was an elite private Historically Black College/University (HBCU) located in the southern US. It offers emerging Black adults what might be considered a quintessential Black college experience in the way of academic excellence, vibrant student life, promotion of positive Black identity, and opportunity for class mobility. As mentioned in Chapter 1, this institution draws students from various class backgrounds, with almost half of the student population being from low-income families. The women in this sample were most prominently from middle-class or upper-middle-class backgrounds. Characteristic of many HBCUs, Hillman is predominately female. Approximately 63% of the student body was women at the time of interview, though most of my sample believed the ratio to be much more skewed than campus statistics show. The perceived severity of the gender imbalance informed students' assessments of their HBCUs' landscape and their expectations and opportunities for sex and romance (Hall, Lee, and Witherspoon 2014; Younge et al. 2013).

The women in my sample would be considered traditional college students who represent the core of Hillman's undergraduate life. All of them transitioned immediately from high school to college and had completed at least one semester there at the time of the study. The average age of the women was 20 years old. None of the women had ever been married or had children. While about one-third of the women were in committed relationships at the time of the interview (n=9), the majority described their most recent sexual encounters in the context of ongoing involvements. These involvements were most often with a boyfriend, a prospective boyfriend, or an ex-boyfriend with whom they maintained a sexual relationship post-breakup. Women's

propensity for heterosexual encounters that are at least monogamous of their part and ongoing signals the sexual projects that women in the sample took up and were revealing considered racialized gender and class expectations around sexuality(Hirsch and Khan 2020).

DATA COLLECTION

My effort to examine the complexities of Black college women’s sexual lives was furthered through qualitative methods. Such methods facilitate thorough and nuanced understandings of phenomena, the myriad factors that contribute to them, and how individuals make sense of their lived experiences (Bowleg 2017; Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett 2003). In-depth interviews were well-suited to gathering data congruent with the broader frameworks that guided my dissertation. Using interviews, I aimed to represent Black college women’s sexual experiences in their own words, bring their everyday lives to the forefront, and demonstrate the interactions between macrolevel systems of power and microlevel experiences and social processes that structured their sexual opportunity on campus (Choo and Feree, 2010; Mullings 2000; Weiss 1994). The objective was to develop a more thorough understanding of how HBCU women positioned themselves and their collegiate sexual and romantic pursuits related to their elite status attainment (Somers 1994; Young 2004). While some social scientists have argued that the reliance of participants’ recall is a fundamental flaw of interviewing, the “accuracy” of interviewees’ information is not as essential for these efforts as what individuals chose to reveal or the mental maps they use in explaining themselves and their worldviews with respect to their sexual and romantic lives (Luker 2009; Pugh 2013). Further, my epistemological stance validates Black women as knowers with authority to speak about and from their social locations (Collins 2002; Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett 2003). This approach accompanies

acknowledging our active roles in constructing and interpreting our social world, lives, and experiences.

Between February and May 2016, I conducted one-time semi-structured interviews with 30 cisgender heterosexual Black women undergraduates enrolled at an HBCU via videoconference or phone. I queried participants about their dating and sex on campus and in their personal lives, often asking them to recall recent occurrences so that specific examples were punctuated throughout the data. I recruited participants through a campus-wide email list service containing all enrolled students. Before scheduling interviews, women were screened using a brief electronic survey to confirm eligibility based on study criteria, including race, gender, age, and sexual identity. Additionally, eligible participants reported having had sexual intercourse with a man in the past twelve months.

Recruitment efforts yielded more interested prospects than I initially imagined or could accommodate at the onset of data collection. A faculty member who was a part of my personal and professional network distributed my recruitment email to current undergraduates. Potential participants could have read this as an endorsement of me, my research intentions, and my legitimacy, which also helped build rapport. Additionally, status as an HBCU alumna, revealed in recruitment materials, facilitated easy access to this sample and likely contributed to this tremendous response (Grundy 2014). Many of the women were eager to help a “sister” in pursuit of her doctoral degree. Some women were personally or academically interested in the research topic and found it a significant undertaking to which they wished to contribute. Others were simply drawn to sharing their stories with someone who they thought would accurately represent them.

During interviews, participants forged a connection with me, offering insider status based on parts of my identity that were assumed (age and sexuality) or that were revealed (HBCU alumna status, race, and gender) in the research process. Indications of collective identity are reflected throughout interviews in which women frequently used “we” and “us” and led with “Girl, you know” and “I’m sure you remember” (Obasi 2014). Further, there was seemingly ease in discussing issues of gender and race drawn from assumptions that I could relate to their perspective and experiences based on shared identity (Johnson-Bailey 1999). Women often inquired about my life at the close of interviews, specifically my romantic experiences and graduate studies. They demonstrated relatedness to me and curiosity about the trajectory of a life project for Black middle-class womanhood informed by their HBCU.

Despite the benefits of this supposed insider status, close social proximity to the sample had some drawbacks in data collection. In interviews, I went to great lengths to elicit information from participants who believed I might not have needed elaboration or specificity. Women sometimes respond by repeating a particular phrase or portion of their sentence verbatim accompanied by an assertion of “you know what I mean.” When this occurred, I affirmed their statement and offered that while I was not ignorant of what they described, my encouragement was to get them to detail their thoughts and opinions to provide more data that I could record. I believe that these efforts were generally effective but pondered on what or how much was unsaid by participants because of the presumption that what they expressed must be familiar to me (Ochieng 2010; Young 2004). Doing this, I signaled my status as a researcher and the context as a research study with objectives rather than a general conversation.

As a Black woman researcher interviewing Black women, I occupied liminal space as an insider and an outsider (Chavez 2008; Dwyer and Buckle 2009; Obasi 2014). My place on this

continuum was neither fixed nor given. Rather, it was negotiated in each part of the research process from conceptualization of the project through writing the dissertation articles. I developed and maintained active self-reflexivity to monitor how my subjectivity, assumptions, and motivation for this study impacted the study design, data interpretation, and reporting. For instance, I recall my initial hesitation to investigate HBCU sexual landscapes for fearing of “airing dirty laundry” to those outside of the community, casting these institutions for which I have a strong affinity a negative light in the presentation of data, or negatively portraying Black women (Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett 2003:210). My epistemological stance allows room for these concerns while challenging them by being accountable to Black women and communities through conducting research with care for my participants and myself (Lincoln and Cannella 2009; Taylor 2018). Further, this research aimed to present wisdom from Black women’s experiences, demonstrate their resistance to oppressive systems, and confront deficit perspectives in Black sexuality research that fail to address social, historical, and cultural factors that inform sexual practice. I highlight how power systems structure sexual vulnerabilities while validating dominant experiences as normative (Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett 2003; McGruder 2009). I challenged myself to reconcile my expectations about what I might find, confront internalized oppression, and reflect on how a priori knowledge impacted each stage of this work (Chávez et al. 2008).

During interviews, I shaped discussions around various aspects of dating and sex in women’s personal lives and on campus. The interview guide explicitly addressed perceptions of eligible Black men, romantic aspirations, agency and power in sexual encounters, and sexual health. However, the semi-structured format allowed for flexibility in this protocol. At the start of interviews, I told women that I wanted it to feel like a conversation. I allowed women to direct

conversations as appropriate, at times, guiding them to topics on the protocol that had yet to be covered. In addition to probing for detail often, I was purposeful in creating opportunities for participants to delve more deeply into particular experiences, thoughts, or reflections at their discretion that my questions might not have otherwise captured. I encouraged participants to share as they saw fit, including passing on questions that they were not comfortable answering. Interviews were, on average, approximately 51 minutes. The flow of the conversations often meant that questions were not always covered in the order I listed them. Still, all topics were covered with each woman. Women could end the interview at any time, decide for a period afterward to have their data removed from the study, or refuse follow-ups, though none of them did. After the interviews, I asked women if they were any questions they wanted to revisit, things they wanted to share but had not earlier in the interview, or topics that they believed I should have asked about that I had not. I used their responses to refine the guide for subsequent interviews. 28 interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed. Two participants did not consent to audio recording, so I took extensive notes during and after their interviews and captured brief, direct quotes when possible. I followed up with short phone calls (less than 30 minutes) to a few women for clarification on items shared in their interviews and to provide further insights into emerging themes. Immediately following each interview, I wrote field notes to record my initial reactions to the conversations, participants' demeanors, and moments that struck me. These notes were a starting place for my analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS

The research questions guiding this dissertation were grounded in literature on Black women's sexual lives and college heterosexuality. I sought to elaborate understandings of sex,

romance, and sexual health by focusing on HBCU sexual landscapes and how institutional context, shaped by broader power structures, matters for heterosexual Black women.

My analysis began with reviewing interview fieldnotes that capture my general impressions of the interview and participants, emerging topics, how, and if these themes connected to earlier conversations. Next, I listened to the audio recordings of each interview thoroughly and read each transcript line by line to familiarize myself with the data. I revisited them throughout the analysis as necessary. Further, I extracted phrases used by women to describe specific romantic and sexual desires, experiences, and feelings around them. I noted pauses, inflections in speech, hurried responses, laughter, and indications of emotions, including frustration, happiness, sadness, and resentment.

I engaged in induction by sticking closely to the data in the analysis as my epistemological stance takes women's knowledge and representations of their experiences seriously (Bowleg 2017; Reichertz 2007). While induction revealed shared experience, themes, and indications of "what's going on," it failed to convey their significance or situate these observations within broader scholarly conversations. Thus, I primarily took an abductive analytic approach that allowed me to consider how puzzles in my data may or may not have been reconciled with existing theories and literature (Tavory and Timmerman 2012). In my analysis, I moved between open, targeted, and thematic coding, where I applied emergent themes as a lens to examine each of the transcripts (Deterding and Waters 2018; Glaser 2005; Tavory and Timmerman 2014). I used Dedoose, a cloud-based qualitative data analysis program, for organization in this process. Additionally, I wrote analytic and theoretical memos to make sense of the data and elaborate on themes and their connections.

During analysis, I went through efforts to de-familiarize and problematize the phenomena, perhaps to a greater extent than would be required of researchers of other racial, class, and gender identities or who lack such intimate knowledge of the topic and context (Greene 2014; Wolf 1992). Rather than considering the organization of heterosexual HBCU women's romantic and sexual experiences as mundane features of social life, I thought of each aspect as worthy of analysis (Patterson et al. 2016). I assessed what was distinct about the observations captured in the data. In doing this, I revisited literature on Black women's sexuality, college heterosexuality, and racialized gender and class to consider what was interesting about my data. Using this analysis, I present three empirical articles that examine heterosexual HBCU women themselves consider sex, romance, and sexual health with respect to their identities, in their institutional context, and at the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexual power.

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CHAPTER 3

“We Want Relationships:” Romantic Aspirations and HBCU Women’s Performances of Race, Class, and Gender

INTRODUCTION

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have long been responsible for the production of the Black middle-class, echoing the primary functions of universities generally for class reproduction, advancement, and identity formation (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Kaufman 2014; Torche 2011). As a site of socialization for the emerging Black elite, these institutions espouse middle-class racial uplift ideology, whereby Black Americans are charged to pursue economic and moral progress to combat racism and contribute to the advancement of the race (Du Bois 1903; Frazier 1957). This ideology circumscribes performances of Black middle-class adulthood to oppose negative racial stereotypes.

Central to these endeavors is accomplishing normalcy through hegemonic gender and (hetero)sexuality. In the face of systematic injustices that limit educational and career trajectories, the failure to “do” appropriate gender through the reproduction of patriarchal family structures has erroneously been blamed for Black Americans’ economic and social conditions (Collins 2004; West and Fenstermaker 1995). Therefore, for Black Americans, class mobility and identity have been coupled with conventional gender performance, sexual propriety, and racial respectability. While much attention has been given to the academic and occupational experiences of Black collegians, romantic and sexual relationships are at the nexus of these efforts.

Drawing on interviews with thirty cisgender heterosexual Black women enrolled at an HBCU, I examine how women seek class mobility and racial uplift through performing respectable Black middle-class womanhood in the context of monogamous relationships with similarly upwardly mobile Black men. Women in the sample described how their romantic and sexual experiences were both dictated and constrained by their campus sexual landscape, which organized opportunities in gender-specific ways. This paper reveals how Black college women engage relational expectations of elite status attainment in a particular college context.

THEORETICAL FRAMING

Racializing Gender

Black gender has been framed by the legacy of slavery and the conditions of racism. Juxtaposed against white gender and sexuality, Black sexuality and gender ideology are pathologized and scapegoated as the reason for pervasive inequities experienced by Black Americans. Controlling images reinforce racial and gendered othering, constructing Black Americans as non-normative and justifying our subjugation (Collins 2002).

Racism has profoundly shaped the structure of the US economy in gender-specific ways. Post-slavery, in the denial of family wages or work opportunities for Black men, Black women's paid work was necessary for families' survival. Black men's assumed failure to accumulate material resources suggested their inability to accomplish hegemonic masculinity. Still, the middle-class standing of Black women is most often predicated on their own professional occupational status rather than on their male partners' economic potential or resources (Collins 2002). In the contemporary context, upwardly mobile Black women are often positioned as competition for Black men when it comes to education and work, intensified by the rhetoric of

“Black male exceptionalism,” the unfounded premise that Black men disproportionately bear the brunt of racism (Butler 2013; Chavous and Cogburn 2007; Grundy 2021).

Romantic and sexual relationships emerge as avenues to balance the incongruences that this creates for Black Americans’ alignment with traditional white gender performance (Fasula, Carry, and Miller 2014). The regulation of Black women’s sexuality as a function of gender suppression relies on problematized Black sexualities to construct heterofemininity, heteromascularity, and sexual hierarchies. Committed, monogamous heterosexual relationships support appropriate Black middle-class gender and sexuality through demonstrating adherence to patriarchal family structures. In this way, controlling Black women is essential for facilitating Black masculinity and heterosexual male dominance (Collins 2004).

As foremost producers of upwardly mobile Black students and the emerging Black middle-class, HBCUs’ ideological instruction should be regarded as significant for modeling racialized class and gender performances (Brown, Donahoo, and Bertrand 2001; Grundy 2012; Mobley and Johnson 2019; Njoku and Patton 2017). The push for hegemonic masculinity and femininity is implicated in HBCUs’ commitments to racial advancement through economic mobility. Likewise, heteronormativity is embedded in racialized gender and class ideologies to establish normalcy and morality. Realizing middle-class status requires resisting pejorative gendered sexualities that are now primarily attributed to working-class and poor Black people (Collins 2004).

Boundary work to distinguish oneself from problematized sexualities—including homosexuality and hyper-heterosexuality—and to avoid racial stigma is essential as Black collegians work to position themselves as respectable (Garcia 2009). For Black women particularly, these efforts require confronting class-based controlling images of Black

womanhood used to support the matriarchal thesis that has been instrumental to our oppression (Collins 2002). As degree-seeking Black women consider who they should be as they transition into middle-class adulthood, the new Black lady emerges as significant. It is meant to counter claims of Black women's brazenness and inappropriate femininity by confining sexuality to monogamous, committed heterosexual relationships (Collins 2004; Thompson 2009). As a controlling image, this framework reflects the ideological restraints of racialized gender and class performances bound to heterosexual monogamy. Still, with notable exceptions (e.g., Clarke 2011; Ford 2018), sociological understandings of middle-class Black women's sexual and romantic experiences remain scant, and Black women's class performances in this arena are rendered invisible. Explorations of how racialized gender and sexuality are implicated in pursuits of elite status for Black women are necessary for expanding romantic and sexual interactions as a site for intraracial gender struggle and, potentially, liberation.

College Heterosexuality and Class Performance

Material and cultural resources for middle-class identity are acquired and appropriated in the university context. Although middle-class and wealthy students do attend HBCUs, HBCUs are distinguished by their being the primary path through which working-class and poor Black students gain access to the middle-class. Thus, for some students, the material resources for class performance may not be accessible. Instead, for Black collegians, regardless of class origin, the production of class identity is co-constituted with race and gender through social practice (Bettie 2000; Lareau 2011). Further, university settings are proverbial training grounds, socializing young adults and shaping repertoires for their anticipated class status (Swidler 1986). In addition to facilitating credentialing necessary for elite-status attainment, opportunities for sex and romance, a key avenue for class performance, are also constructed by these environments.

Romantic desires and choices reflect the connections between racialized gender, class, and sexuality and demonstrate the contextual re-creation of these categories (Bourdieu 1977). Young adults draw on available schemas for imagining the “right” kinds of partners who possess the “right” capital and are directed to pursue the “right” sexual experiences (Johnson and Lawler 2005). These notions are predicated on racialized, gendered, and classed ways of understanding social mobility, particularly for women of color (Ray 2017). Black collegiate women may not view the economic resources of a male partner as being the only or best pathway to mobility. Still, heterosexual marriage to a suitable mate is necessary for their identity formation project and respectable class performance.

Though women’s location within the university context grants some advantages for romance, sex, and ultimately marriage, Black women still face constraints to their relational and sexual desires shaped by their race, gender, and class locations. Colleges seemingly provide a pool of desirable partners. However, gender-specific manifestations of structural racism, implicated in mass incarceration, educational trajectories, and economic opportunity, shapes dating populations on and off campus. Consequently, romantic opportunities, especially for heterosexual Black women, are impacted. Some work contends that now-degreed women viewed their possibilities for suitable partners as expanding while in college (Clark 2011). However, studies with currently enrolled Black collegiate women at both historically white institutions (HWIs) and HBCUs feel that they lack opportunities for sexual and romantic partnering (Stackman, Reviere, and Medley 2016). Furthermore, Black women’s preference for racial homophily, which serves to maintain strong Black identities and indicate racial solidarity, remains steady despite supposedly limited prospects for similarly situated heterosexual partners (Dixon 2009; Kaba 2012). Though useful, neither structural market-based explanations nor

studies of individual preference provide a comprehensive picture of Black women's romantic and sexual lives, particularly during collegiate years, which are rarely captured in this work (Cherlin 2010; Clark 2011; Ford 2018; Longmire and Reavis 2015). To develop more nuanced insights into Black collegiate heterosexuality, we must look consider the nuances of relationship aspirations and partner preference as the result of broader socio-cultural processes.

Class and race intersect with pervasive gender inequity to organize women's heterosexual interactions. Hegemonic masculinity hinges on heterosexual dominance, assertion, and conquest. At the same time, women are relegated to a passive role in which they are expected to simply respond to male partners' romantic and sexual requests. Placing women's and men's sexualities in opposition provides rationale for differential standards by which status is predicated on how one "does" gendered and classed sexuality (Fasula, Carry, and Miller 2014). Scholars have argued that strategies for elite-status attainment through investing in educational and career opportunities support more casual romantic and sexual interaction over more committed relationships on campus by freeing time and energy to investment in career advancement (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). However, shifts in the nature of collegiate heterosexual interaction have not been shown to change how sexual involvement as an aspect of racialized class and gender performance is evaluated. As a result, women's sexual behaviors remain subject to scrutiny in ways that men's are not. Further, gendered double standards grant men more power over the terms of romantic and sexual involvement (Hall, Lee, and Witherspoon 2014; Uecker and Regnerus 2010). Consequently, women face barriers to the experiences they desire and are central to appropriate racialized, classed, and gendered sexuality.

The racialization of Black women's sexualities amplifies these dynamics. Though Black women have been ideologically absent in traditional norms of white female sexuality, gender and

sexuality work as systems of power to maintain racial order, positioning Black female sexuality as deviant (Fasula, Carry, and Miller 2014; Stephens and Phillips 2005). While casual sex undoubtedly happens on campus, HBCU students consider the links between race and the meanings of their sexual behaviors beyond the involvement itself (Grundy 2021). HBCUs' promotion of individual sexual propriety for racial respectability may conflict with more permissive sexual cultures of HWIs that facilitate self-development over romantic commitment (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Ray and Rosow 2010). Thus, Black collegians' romantic and sexual experiences may not mirror those of white counterparts (Anakaraonye et al. 2019; Paul, McManus, and Hayes 2000). Yet, the extent remains unclear, as research on college heterosexuality tends to center the experiences of white students and settings in which the number of Black students is limited and party cultures are prominent (Berntson, Hoffman, and Luff 2014; Hall and Tanner 2016; Pham 2017). Particular dilemmas may arise for middle-class gender performance and status attainment in divergent ways for Black collegians across institutional contexts.

DATA AND METHODS

This research is based on thirty in-depth, semi-structured interviews with cisgender heterosexual Black women enrolled as undergraduates at a four-year HBCU in the southern United States, which I refer to by the pseudonym Hillman College.² Study participants were recruited through a campus-wide email list service containing enrolled students and subsequently screened to confirm eligibility based on study criteria. Interviews begin during the second semester of the academic year, so each participant had completed at least one term at their university. All communication stated that the study sought to better understand how heterosexual

² This is a reference to a prominent 1990s sitcom about life at a fictional HBCU.

Black women at HBCUs think about and deal with dating, sex, and sexual health. None of the women had ever been married or had a child. All women reported sexual intercourse with a man at least once within the last twelve months at the time of interviews. Table 1 provides pseudonyms and characteristics of participants. I conducted interviews during a six-month period in 2016 via phone or video call through a secure videoconferencing platform. Interviews were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed.

As a Black woman researcher interviewing Black women, I occupy liminal space as both an insider and an outsider (Obasi 2014). I remained cognizant of “gradations of endogeneity” in research design, data collection, and analysis. Despite sharing racial, gender, and potentially class identities with the women in the sample, my status as a researcher inevitably positions me as an outsider (Johnson 2013; Nelson 1996). Nevertheless, participants seemed to forge a connection with me, offering insider status based on parts of my identity that were assumed (age and sexuality) or that I revealed (HBCU alumna status) in the research process. Indications of collective identity are reflected throughout interviews in which women frequently used “we” and “us” and led with “Girl, you know” and “I’m sure you remember” (Obasi 2014). Further, there was seeming ease in discussing issues of gender and race drawn from assumptions that I could relate to their perspective and experiences based on shared identity (Johnson-Bailey 1999). Women inquired about my life at the close of interviews, specifically my romantic experiences and graduate studies. They demonstrated relatedness to me and curiosity about the trajectory of a life project informed by their HBCU.

One of the disadvantages of this social proximity is that I had to self-consciously defamiliarize myself with the phenomena to a greater extent than would be required of researchers of other racial, class, and gender identities or who lack such familiarity with HBCUs

(Wolf 1992). For example, rather than considering the organization of heterosexual HBCU women's romantic and sexual lives as mundane features of social life, I tasked myself with considering each aspect as worthy of analysis. Likewise, I went to great lengths to elicit information from participants who believed I might not have needed elaboration or specificity.

I structured interviews around various aspects of dating and sex in their personal lives and on campus. The interview guide explicitly addresses perceptions of eligible Black men, power and control in sexual encounters, and sexual health practices such as condom use. First, I listened to each interview thoroughly and read each transcript line by line to familiarize myself with the data. I also extracted phrases used by women to describe specific romantic and sexual desires, experiences, and feelings around them. I noted pauses, inflections in speech, hurried responses, laughter, and indications of emotions, including frustration, happiness, sadness, and resentment. Next, I wrote one- to two-page memos to elaborate on themes that appeared across multiple transcripts. Some of these themes included class mobility, monogamy, vigilance, agency, and ideas about sexual respectability. Using an abductive approach, I then applied emergent themes as a lens to examine each of the transcripts (Deterding and Waters 2018; Tavory and Timmerman 2014). In the next section, I present my analysis of how HBCU women understand collegiate romance and sex as central to their racialized gender and class performance and mobility.

FINDINGS

Middle-class status attainment involves both professional success through academic credentials and the creation of a particular family form. Though schooling delays marriage and family formation, women's romantic and sexual experiences during college are inextricably related to their later romantic experiences and thus to both marriage formation and ultimate class

location (Hamilton and Armstrong 2021). In what follows, I describe heterosexual HBCU women's romantic and sexual aspirations by describing their desired relationships and partners in their own words. I will then present women's perceptions of their romantic and sexual opportunities, revealing their frustration with the difficulties of getting what they want in this context. I consider how the campus landscape both facilitates and obstructs access to the relationships they desire.

Constructing Ideal Romance

Most women in the sample ($n = 28$) expressed wanting a committed, monogamous relationship in college. In contrast to the findings of some studies of white women at HWIs (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009), Hillmen women interviewees framed a committed relationship as complementary rather than adversarial to pursuing academic excellence and professional success. Dominique, a first-year pre-medical student, shared her view of college relationships as consistent with accomplishing an elite, Black female identity:

We're in college now. You're trying to be mature about everything and there's no time for games to really be played for a girl. I don't want to have to sit here and stress about what a guy is doing. I should be able to trust him, and I want a person that's willing to help me. We can help each other be on the grind to be successful in life. We have the same mindset that we need to get a 4.0, and we need to get all the opportunities we have out here. We need to try to go after them and get those opportunities.

Like many of the women interviewed, she contended that committed relationships do not interfere with the credentialing process. On the contrary, this relationship form is believed to provide the security, stability, and social support necessary for achievement.

The women aspired to form a "power couple," a romantic partnership in which both parties are successful in their own right and contribute to each other's development. Marriages between Hillman men and women, referred to as "Hill House" marriages, were considered

exemplars of this relationship dynamic. These relationships are a venerable tradition embedded in the culture of this school and HBCUs collectively. “Hill Houses” reflect idealized Black middle-class gender performance and demonstrate the significance of relationship/family formation for racial progress and elite, Black identity. Raven, a senior, reflected on how this practice is upheld through cultural affinity, university programming, and peers:

A lot of times, it’s just everybody is so quick to want that Hill House couple thing that they see their parents having or that they talk about during [orientation]. There’s a lot of people who want to find their college sweethearts. I feel like people at Hillman have a certain entitlement about it, especially men. If they find out a girl from Hillman is dating someone outside, they might be like, “You need to get you a Hillman guy. You need to get you a man of Hillman.” They feel like Hillman girls should be dating a Hillman guy. They feel like, “You’re one of us, so you’re going to be with us.”

As Raven demonstrated, committed, monogamous relationships with Hillman men are positioned as socially valuable, distinguishing the emerging Black elite couple as racially *and* class-marked and solidifying status through partnering.

Still, not every Hillman man is a suitable prospect for a Hill House marriage. The centrality of heterosexual monogamy for accomplishing an elite Black middle-class identity propelled women to seek not only this specific relationship structure but particular kinds of men. Consistent with previous research, Hillman women most prominently desired partners whose race and anticipated class status were aligned with their own (Clarke 2011; Collins 2004; Dixon 2009). Generally, college dating pools are characterized by homophily. However, women in the sample emphasized the novelty of HBCUs’ dating populations in which potential partners of equal educational and class status that are also Black are typical. Monica explained how her HBCU inherently provided pools of desirable partners for Black women, facilitating the relationships that women in the sample wanted:

You're forced to be dating someone that is of educational status, economic status. For me, having someone of the same status is important because I feel like we live in a society where it's hard to find mates of the same status. At Hillman, it's already set in place for you. It's important for the future. I feel like that status can be somewhat of a touchy subject when it comes to relationships. If it's already kind of there, and it's already at equal levels, then that's a hurdle that you don't have to cross in a relationship.

Further, Hillman women wanted relationships equal along all dimensions, though some invoked traditional gender norms for organizing courtship standards while challenging others (Lamont 2014). Men's consciousness around political and social issues was assessed to determine their capacity for the collaborative liaisons women sought. Solidarity for Black women is considered essential at the individual level for their own mobility and at a larger level for advancing racial progress. Potential partners were expected to be aware of and to attend to gendered racism in interpersonal relationships. Though attending to racism and its impacts on the lives of students is the utmost priority of HBCU, Mariah highlighted how well-meaning attempts to prepare Black men for the middle-class shape their navigations of dating in ways that marginalize Black women and their contributions to society and Black life:

I think that what Hillman does is they teach them how to be a Black man in a white world. The result of that is a lot of men here, who just are very overconfident. Like they just think that they are all just kings. It doesn't create a very conducive dating environment. I just feel like they just think the world revolves around them. They don't acknowledge their privilege as men, they are just focused on racial analyses of their life and their education. When it comes to dating one, they expect you to be somebody in their world, instead of creating a world together, you know what I mean.

Hillman women's characterizations of ideal partnerships revealed the ways existing race, class, and gender structures are simultaneously accepted, reified, and problematized in the pursuit of sex and romance. HBCUs' promotion of racial uplift criticizes Black gender's supposed more egalitarian nature as non-normative.

Such ideology places women's value and financial standing in the context of heterosexual marriage. As mentioned, the conditions of racism have historically impaired access to these dynamics for Black women. Still, rigid gender performances that subjugate women are promoted as necessary to prove normalcy and achieve respectability (Higginbotham 1993). Black women are thus socialized around racialized gender norms that encourage self-sufficiency while simultaneously being expected to embody white middle-class gender norms (Johnson 2013). First-year Chantelle reacted to traditional ideologies that center white femininity, class status, and the cult of true womanhood:

I feel like growing up, even though I'm younger, I've watched movies, and you see the man is supposed to take care of the woman. I don't really believe in that, like "you're supposed to take care of me?" But I do want you to be my equal or better. I think I have a certain standard. I always want to better myself, so my equal would be someone who wants to better themselves.

Systematic racial inequities have restrained upward class mobility and wealth attainment despite family structure (Bloome 2014). Furthermore, marriage does not serve as an equalizer, especially for Black women. Thus, financial independence is central to Hillman women's emerging Black middle-class womanhood (Clarke 2011; Ford 2018). Interviews revealed strong resistance to notions that women's economic security and status should hinge on a male partner's material resources. Still, they believed that their partners should be able to match theirs. Erica described the importance of this for romantic partnerships:

I want to be a doctor, so I'm not trying to talk to somebody that doesn't even want to better their own life. I don't want to carry somebody else, you know? They don't have to have the same passion as me, but as long as they have their own passion and they want to be successful, they have a dream and an ambition to become something. I'm not saying he has to be like Mr. Perfect, he has to be a lawyer or doctor but as long as he's giving effort to better his life and get higher education.

Erica correlated postsecondary education to earning potential and indicated partners' plans for success. Women considered a college degree essential for betterment. However, merely

being enrolled in college was not enough; potential partners must mirror their ambition and focus. Hillman women used themselves as the benchmark to assess men's suitability, stating that they should be equally invested in their own personal and academic growth. Maya, a sophomore, described her criteria for a partner:

I do view dating as a conduit to marriage or at least a long-term commitment. I have certain standards for myself, and so I guess I have those same standards for my partner because I don't want to be unequally yoked. To me, the standard is him taking his grades seriously, and to me, that shows that you have a number of things. You're hard-working, which can apply to different aspects of your life. You should have some level of intelligence. Both of those things. Because it leads to other things that are important. I feel because we're at this age now, like, you can't be dating people because he's the star of the football team. I mean, that doesn't really matter.

Tiffany, a sophomore engineering major, went further by claiming that potential partners' behaviors in all realms of their lives demonstrate proper self-development and their appropriateness for a romantic relationship:

An eligible Black man, from my perspective, is somebody who is on the same path as me. When I say same path, I would say internships or co-ops and how you spend your time outside of school. Someone who has critically thought through their life and different things they want to do. As well as someone who not getting in a lot of trouble, who's not, you know? Someone who's on the straight and narrow. Someone who's not doing anything to potentially mess up their chances and their goals and their aspirations. How you deal with the police. How you deal with drinking and smoking. What do you, you know, outside of school, what defines you, in a way.

In the excerpt, Tiffany emphasized that investment in oneself and the future is tied to making the "right" choices beyond the classroom. Women saw these as indicators of men's likelihood of success and how partnerships might impact their own mobility. Similarly, women asserted that young Black men face specific barriers to making the "right" choices due to systematic racism and stereotypes that shape how they are seen in broader society and how they

see themselves. As Alicia explained, the way Black men navigate inequity influenced women's evaluations of them as suitable and desirable partners:

A Black man is going to go through so much regardless, and in society they don't want to see a Black man succeed. If you prove them wrong and succeed, that makes you eligible. Versus you going out selling drugs, doing the norms that they expect you to do. Then you're not eligible because you're doing what somebody wants you to do versus proving society wrong. He should go to school and try to get a degree, like any degree. You know, show other Black boys that they can grow up and actually be something.

HBCU women were quite knowledgeable of how injustice over the life course impacts educational and career trajectories. They drew on popular and scholarly explanations that have focused predominantly on how Black men's lives are affected as a result. Nevertheless, potential partners were expected to disprove notions of Black people as inferior through securing educational and financial success. Women believed that potential partners should represent proper Black masculinity and Black excellence by navigating a racist and classist society to obtain status through conventional channels.³ While women grappled with the reality of inequity on their romantic possibilities, the "right" kind of partner was considered necessary for an elite Black female identity through individual and relational efforts for mobility.

The consensus among Hillman women was that committed, monogamous relationships were well-suited to accomplishing their ambitious life goals—which necessarily involved navigating racial, gender, and class inequities. However, there were notable exceptions to this.

³ The mainstream idea of Black excellence has come to be understood as accolades for conventional success through institutions that continue to oppress and exclude Black Americans. Meritocracy is implicated and reproduced in these appraisals. While intended to shift narratives to positive images of Black Americans who have persisted in the face of racist and classist structures, it represents a complex relationship between challenging and reinforcing interlocking systems of oppression, like racial uplift ideology and politics of respectability. The ways "Black Excellence" is commonly deployed draws distinction between those who achieve despite oppression (i.e., college acceptances, corporate job offers) and those who somehow supposedly fail to overcome them. This invokes ideas around the neoliberal agent who is responsible for their own sustainability while injustice social structures that shape life chances are obscured. Though racial capitalism, in conjunction with other systems, continue to impact Black Americans in all realms of social life, this idea positions the individual as solely responsible for "conquering" them.

Two women in my sample, both seniors, expressed tensions between investing in career pursuits and investing in romantic and sexual opportunity during their collegiate years. In their interviews, they alternated between presently wanting romantic monogamy and wanting to remain commitment-free to reduce impediments to their professional goals. As explored elsewhere, this strain reflects a bind that college women face as a result of a gendered relational imperative: juggling the belief that women should want relationships and a classed self-development imperative, which dictates that privileged young adults devote their time and energy to career advancement (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). Previous research has suggested that college environments facilitate more casual sexual encounters to reconcile these tensions (Bisson and Levine 2009; Glenn and Marquardt 2001). However, women in this sample largely did not participate in hookups (as they are traditionally considered) or see them as a viable sexual solution. The impetus for racial respectability specifies both the relational and the occupational standards for middle-class Black womanhood, leaving women with few alternatives for imagining acceptable sex and romance, particularly in the HBCU context.

Obstacles to Relationship Goals

As demonstrated above, Hillman women wanted committed monogamous relationships in college with Black men who were similarly committed to success in life and career. Women had high standards for themselves and equally for their partners. However, the women nearly universally reported disappointment with their opportunities for this relationship structure at Hillman. One of the foremost obstacles women identified was insufficient numbers of men in general on their campus. Though women outnumber men in most postsecondary institutions, this pattern tends to be most pronounced at HBCUs, with a few institutions reporting a student body that is more than 75 percent female (National Center for Education Statistics 2019) and is

characteristic of broader African American communities (Ferguson et al. 2006). Upon entering Hillman, women believed that their university *should* provide better opportunities for partners and relationships than in general Black populations. However, women described a gender ratio that was heavily skewed female, which, consequently, shaped their approach to sex and dating on and off campus. Aaliyah, a junior on the pre-law track, described the ratio as at least three women to every man. She explained the impact of this on her dating prospects:

In terms of dating, I feel it can be kind of bad because it's not only the ratio of men, but then it's the ratio of straight guys, too, at Hillman. Yeah, it's not ideal. At least for a woman. I guess maybe I'm picky. I think every woman has things that they look for in a guy that they would potentially date, but I feel like—at least I haven't met as many as I'd like to at Hillman, and I feel like maybe it's because there aren't that many.

Racial and class inequities structure dating populations and contribute to rhetoric around limited numbers of suitable Black male partners. These circumstances constrained women's relationship opportunities by permitting men's preferences to influence heterosexual arrangements. As a result, Hillman women were left overpowered in romance and sex and struggled to meet gender and class expectations. Tia, a junior economics major, shared the consequences of this power imbalance on these accomplishments:

I feel like being at Hillman, like, there's such a lot of females who are career-oriented, that are goal-driven, that are motivated and determined. I mean, that's basically just the culture—with the heterosexual Black male just being a vast minority in this situation. I'm young and in my prime. I shouldn't have any problem finding a man, but still, there's this gap. Like, I really want someone there, and no one's there the way that I want them to be. And so people will lower themselves to basically kind of get what they can get, and that's that guy trying to capitalize upon the situation. And I'd definitely have to say that I've fell into the category for a period of time of women who have lowered themselves to just be with someone, just to have someone there.

Hillman women's sexual and romantic lives were frequently characterized by acquiescence to male partners' requests, typically in the nature and terms of the involvement.

Such arrangements created less than ideal conditions for women to maintain pathways for their desired relationship structure.

In the previous section, I outlined women's requirements for suitable partners. As would be expected in any population, not every man on Hillman's campus met the women's standards. This further impacted women's opportunities for monogamous committed relationships. Kennedy expounded how these delineations limited the pool of eligible partners for Hillman women:

Because like I said, we're looking for someone that's A, B, C. At this point, not all will hit every criteria. I think personally, for me, I look at looks being the basic general thing and how they carry themselves. Are they still in school, have their stuff together? Things like that. Something we do at Hillman is we automatically categorize men. You're going to look at them a different way, and requirements might be different as far as what you expect of them. They have more, higher eligibility requirements, because they look at them as these are the people that you can so-called marry, and these are the people that we can try to have a future with.

As Kennedy reiterated, women's standards reflected their intention of sustainable relationships that align with appropriate racial, class, and gender performance. Still, a few Hillman women claimed that women need to make concessions to receive opportunities for romance and sex. Naomi stated that they must consider the finite number of available mates when evaluating potential partners:

As far as eligible bachelors, I think it's a small pool of them. I feel like you have to compromise a lot of—some things maybe that you're looking for. Like "Oh, he's not educated, but he's never been to jail" or "He's been to jail, but now he has this career, which is good" or "He has one child." Stuff like that. It's not a perfect bachelor.

Senior Kiara agreed that women's rigid criteria for determining suitability further restrict relationship opportunities. In this excerpt, she reacted to a fellow Hillman woman's characterization of a desirable partner and the impact she believed this has on romantic prospects:

Sometimes people get caught up in status. The thing is, when you get too much into—how do I put this? There are certain things that I feel like I’m looking at for someone, but it shouldn’t get to a point where, for me, it’s pigeonholing it so much that the pool becomes so small. That’s not saying just don’t have standards. No dudes going to have literally every single thing you want. I feel other people really pigeonhole what they consider an eligible Black man to the point where it’s like, okay, no wonder you’re single.

Even those men who did meet these criteria did not seem interested in pursuing romance and sex in ways consistent with what the women thought appropriate in terms of gender, class, race, mobility, and Black middle-class performance. Hillman women viewed Black men’s relational and sexual desires in opposition to theirs, citing this as a significant barrier to the relationships they want. Courtney, a senior political science major, shared that the imbalanced gender ratio, age, and development contributed to men’s desire for non-monogamy:

I was expecting to see a bunch of young Black men going somewhere in life. Not to say that they aren’t, but a lot are focused as I imagined. Most don’t really want a relationship at all. It just kind of goes back to what I said: pickings are slim. Another factor I think goes in eligibility is actually looking for a relationship and not just a hookup. That knocks a lot of people off the radar. A lot of people—women, and men—aren’t quite ready to settle down. I think men more so than women, though so it kind of throws things off. I feel like there are already more women to men. Then, when you have more women who want to be in a relationship, that just makes the imbalance even more off.

Shawna similarly expressed her frustration with Hillman men’s incompatible and unacceptable relationship desires:

I think that in the generation that we live in that everybody thinks that—well, it’s popular to be an “ain’t crap n-word.” I think that guys are too busy trying to be that. A lot of us girls, we want relationships, but guys want situationships. They want the convenience of having an affair but not giving us the title. The media idolizes the idea of men having multiple females and not committing. That’s what guys are like, that’s what they want too, and girls are like, “We still want to be picked up. We want doors opened for us, dates paid for,” and stuff like that, you know. But I think that society just glamorizes this idea of men having this power to do what they want and still have that female around.

Women's condemnation of men's sexual conduct showed resistance to the inequity of gendered double standards. Gender privilege granted heterosexual Black male collegians power to determine the nature of heterosexual interaction on campus while women felt restricted despite their disapproval. Many women believed that men are cognizant of gendered expectations Black college women faced and appealed to these, instead altering romantic and sexual opportunities on their terms. Brittany explained that rather than being transparent about what they want at the onset, Hillman men misrepresented their intentions for romantic and sexual involvement, rejecting access to the monogamy women seek:

The general consensus is pretty much that people aren't serious, and usually it's the boys that aren't serious, because the girls feel as if they spend time trying to get to know a guy and different things like that only to have him cheat on her or have him otherwise embarrass her or basically just be disloyal. There's a mismatch in basically the way that we're able to date because the girls want something more serious most times, and the guys pretend to, but they don't really. Generally speaking, I've never seriously dated anyone at Hillman.

Women's accounts suggested that men's regulation of sexual and romantic interactions was rooted in attempts to exercise power over Hillman women and in a domain accessible for men who may lack access to other means of control. Other women in the sample demonstrated how men jockey for power through performing masculinity among male peers (Grundy 2012). For example, Jocelyn explained how men used heterosexuality to establish class and gender dominance through the sexual consumption of women who are considered high status:

They want to seem like they're the big dog, like, "Oh, I can get anybody I want and do anything," which is not really attractive. No one really cares about who you're having sex with right now. That's something that I'm not interested in, like, "Oh, you're having sex with so many girls. That's so attractive." I feel like that's what guys do. They feel like they have to have some type of list, so when they talk to other guys, it's like, "oh, I had sex with her, you had sex with her?" I guess like a competition. It's kind of like a trophy type of ordeal which I don't completely understand.

While Hillman women felt that they could not get men to align with their desires, they felt compelled to try, since their status hinged on access to monogamous, committed relationships. Women's relationship statuses at the time of interview did not mirror this desired structure; most women ($n = 11$) identified as single (see Table 1). Given notions of appropriate sexualities, hyper-surveillance, stigma, and the insular campus community, women did not think they had the option to engage in sex and romance like men—nor did they want to. They were subject to surveillance and scrutiny for possible sexual excess while engaging with men who were not similarly constrained. This gendered double standard is intensified by respectability politics, rooted in restrictive gender rules, controlling Black women's sexuality, and dictating permissible conditions for sex and romance.

Thus, many women ended up in situationships or “talking” to men—liaisons that were ongoing but often monogamous only on women's side. Women in the sample viewed this in one of three ways: as a stage in the relationship formation process, as an avenue for a potential monogamous, committed relationship down the line should the circumstances permit, or as a distinct arrangement. Situationships, which were as prevalent in the sample as committed relationships, seemed the most available way to maintain continuous sexual and romantic involvement. Notably, this arrangement was not particularly sought out by women. However, some of them did share transitions from a situationship to a committed relationship, typically on the male partner's terms, though others, such as Kayla, had not yet been successful in securing what they wanted through this form:

I don't think we will ever be in a committed relationship, but I did ask him in November, “Hey, what do you think about this?” We are involved sexually, but we're not in a relationship. He's not having sex outside of what we do, and I'm not having sex outside what we do, but we're not dating.

Though not what women necessarily desire, the nature of this amorphous relationship form enabled Black women to appease middle-class Black relational expectations and preserve their status through the facilitation of quasi-monogamy.

DISCUSSION

Middle-class Black Americans are positioned as representatives of the race tasked with validating rights for full citizenship through success and status attainment. While invoked to formulate a positive Black identity in a destabilizing racial landscape, Black respectability politics and racial uplift ideology presume racial pathology, promote class distinction, and endorse oppressive gender standards. HBCUs continue to serve as key locations for transmitting appropriate racialized gender and class expectations for the emerging Black middle-class. These rules not only require educational and financial distinctions from poor and working-class Black people but call for individuals to negate associated problematized gender and sexuality. Such directives are implicated in Black collegians' relational desires and opportunities.

Hillman women undoubtedly seek romantic and sexual involvement for love, pleasure, and companionship, but these undertakings also facilitate racialized class and gender performance. Committed, monogamous, heterosexual relationships with similarly situated Black men are fundamental to support appropriate middle-class gender, patriarchal family structures, and sexual propriety. HBCU men, too, are attempting to do class and gender from a place of marginality. Traditional hegemonic masculinity has been unattainable for Black men due because of their derogated racial status; however, heterosexuality provides pathways for gender and class dominance. While committed monogamous relationships with similarly situated Black men necessary for Hillman women's middle-class status attainment, men's gender privilege

allows them more control over heterosexual interactions to resolves their otherwise inadequate masculine performance (Collins 2004; Fasula, Carry, and Miller 2014; Grundy 2012).

Perceived differences in relational desires reveal how meanings of sex, morality, and mobility are gendered and racialized in this college context. Black women are tasked with supporting Black men to their “rightful” place in patriarchal society. Yet Black women are also seeking solidarity and equity from them in romantic relationships. As far as women are concerned, Hillman men’s sexual behaviors threaten heterosexual Hillman women’s relational aspirations and status. HBCU women lack gender privilege but use middle-class rules to problematize men’s behavior and gendered sexual double standards. Further, characterizations of Black hyper heterosexuality likely informed women’s criticism of men’s sexual conduct. This reveals how existing Black sexual politics continue to be a source of antagonism between Black women and men and strain for Black people collectively across gender and class lines.

To be clear, I do not seek to valorize heterosexual monogamy or condemn the romantic and sexual pursuits of Black collegians. Rather, I intend to demonstrate how racial, class, and gender structures compel elite Black identity formation and, by consequence, create dilemmas for HBCU women’s sexual and dating lives. Women do not find the conditions of their institutional environment favorable for securing the relationship structure they seek. In this context, the significance of heterosexual monogamy for racialized gender and class performance results in an ideological obstruction. Hillman women craft opportunities for sex and romance within strict parameters established for appropriate Black middle-class womanhood despite these constraints. Restrictive standards emerge, denying marginalized groups freedom and self-definition, even in the most intimate aspects of our lives. Efforts for racial justice would be remiss if they were to prioritize sex and romance as an important area of focus. Further research

is needed on the ways in which intersectional inequities manifest and are resisted within the organization and experiences of sexual and romantic interactions among Black Americans, explicitly considering sexuality as a critical aspect of racialized gender and class. Additionally, this work should examine how Black institutions such as HBCUs legitimize and interrogate dominant ideology around race, gender, class, and sexuality and the implications for sexual subjectivity.

This current study contributes to a growing body of work that highlights the role of HBCUs for how class performances of racialized gender through romance and sex both challenge and sustain inequity across Black life and in broader society (Grundy 2021). By centering the experiences of Black college women, this work emphasizes the significance of class in addition to race and gender in organizing the lives of heterosexual Black women. Further, it contributes to knowledge in an aspect of middle-class Black women's lives that is often neglected in sociological inquiry by underscoring the significance of romantic and sexual negotiations for racial, gender, and class identity formation. Future studies would benefit from longitudinal interviews to detail how these processes unfold during matriculation and beyond. While this work focuses on perceptions of male counterparts' sexual and romantic desires from the perspective of HBCU women, it does not explore the aspirations or experiences of men themselves. Future inquiries with HBCU men would provide more comprehensive explorations of HBCU sexual landscapes and Black male students' experiences.

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CHAPTER 4

In Pursuit of Power Coupling: Heterosexual Women's Navigations of Sex, Romance, and Sexual Health at an HBCU

INTRODUCTION

Universities are racialized and classed locations that dictate rules for sex and dating (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Ray and Rosow 2010). While studies of college heterosexuality provide insight into how gender and class operate in heterosexual encounters, little is known about the dating and sexual lives of women of color in college, particularly Black women (Anakaraonye et al. 2019; Hall and Pichon 2014; Hall and Tanner 2016; Hargons et al. 2018). We need to better understand the complex ways in which racism, in addition to classism, sexism, and heterosexism, shapes undergraduates' sexual experiences and health. Investigations of how college contexts impact sexuality require examinations of diverse campus landscapes, such as minority-serving institutions, including Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (Grundy 2021).

This research draws on in-depth interviews with thirty undergraduates to explore gendered, classed, and racialized romantic and sexual experiences of heterosexual Black women at HBCUs. Women in this sample perceived their campus as a challenging sexual terrain characterized by imbalanced gender ratios, close sexual and dating networks, and Black gender ideology that impeded negotiation of romantic and sexual encounters. Women relied on three strategies for navigating sex, dating, and romance, as they sought committed, monogamous

relationships that they perceived as consistent with an elite, Black female identity. The three strategies—opting out, paying to play, and calling the shots—reveal the possibilities and limitations of sexual agency in the context of intersectional inequities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Matrix of Domination and College Heterosexuality

Heterosexual interactions on college campuses remain a significant battleground for intersectional inequities. The matrix of domination provides a framework for understanding how college heterosexuality is simultaneously racialized, classed, and gendered (Collins 2002). Institutional arrangements of historically white universities (HWIs) maintain class and racial boundaries around sex and dating (Anakaraonye et al. 2019; Clarke 2011; Ray and Rosow 2010). Thus, resulting campus sexual cultures are dictated by white middle-class rules for romance and advantage white middle-class students.

These contexts structure opportunities and vulnerabilities for sexual interaction differently based on one's social position (Hirsch and Khan 2020). For privileged white college women, the dominance of hooking up at HWIs allow them to reconcile a “relational double bind” created by their gender and class rules, while working-class white women, women of color, and queer students are generally marginalized within these cultures (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). For Black college women, several dynamics are at play that significantly impact romantic and sexual possibilities, including the small numbers of Black students on campus, the preference for racial homophily, and racialized gender stereotypes (Allison and Risman 2014; McClintock 2010; Spell 2016).

Still, scholars have not adequately recognized how (white) hookup cultures may be at odds with the racialized gender and class expectations Black college women face. The

significance of racialization for constructing campus landscapes mostly goes unremarked in college heterosexuality literature, though rules for sex are about making whiteness in addition to “doing” gender and class on white, elite campuses (West and Fenstermaker 1995; Grundy 2021). Further, social, economic, and ideological conditions that support interlocking systems of oppression may shape Black women’s sexual experiences in distinct ways across institutional types. This work makes explicit how race shapes cultural rules for sex, romance, and sexual health on campus, and subsequently organizes Black collegians’ heterosexual interactions. I consider HBCUs as a critical context for exploring the racialization and gendering of Black women’s sexualities within in a Black space.

HBCU Campuses and Racialized Classed Gender Ideology

Black women are socialized to be respectable and to adhere to traditional white middle-class gender norms, such as female passivity, both of which are in opposition to the independence, self-reliance, and strength that Black women are obliged to embody to navigate gendered racism (Ford 2018; Johnson 2013). Thus, in heterosexual interactions, Black women confront conflicting racial, class, and gender expectations: the pathologization of Black women’s “dominance” and “strength” and the appropriateness of white women’s “submissiveness” in addition to racialized class-based rules about the conditions under which sex is permissible (Collins 2004; Grundy 2012; Johnson 2013). The incongruences of these expectations make negotiations of intimate relationships particularly complex. Black college women simultaneously contend with male-dominant gender norms, classed expectations about suitable partners, and racialized controlling images of womanhood.

Black ladyhood is meant to counter claims of promiscuity attributed to Black working-class sexuality. Black ladies are what poor and working-class Black women are not—controlled,

pious, and respectable. Hence, respectable Black middle-class sexuality is ideally confined to the context of heterosexual, monogamous, committed relationships, rendering access to this relationship structure a requisite resource for an elite Black female identity *and* acceptable sexual activity (Clarke 2011; Collins 2004).

Institutional endorsements of respectability for the sake of racial progress are resounding as Black women seek degrees and middle-class identities. HBCU climates tend to be conservative and heavily police students' sexuality and gender to promote propriety (Grundy 2012; Njoku, Butler, and Beatty 2017; Warren-Jeanpiere, Sutton, and Jones 2011). The focus on race, racial progress, and racism often obscure how the promotion of such ideologies sustains existing class structures and gendered racism. HBCUs present unique context in which a response to racism makes sexuality and gender performances hyper-visible, yet gender-specific vulnerabilities remain unobserved.

Despite promoting heteronormative notions of Black womanhood, these landscapes do not easily allow women to realize aligned relational and sexual expectations. This paper reveals how HBCU women's pursuits of relational and sexual relationships are compounded by interlocking systems of race, gender, and class oppression and their ideological constraints. HBCU women face and must navigate vulnerabilities shaped by matrices of domination within and beyond their institutional context.

Conversely, the larger population of Black students and the cultivation of Black pride at HBCUs promote belonging and a strong sense of self-concept, and presents opportunities for articulation, refinement, and experimentation of Black gender and sexuality at the micro-level. While some of these processes are facilitated with institutional support such as sororities and student government, others may be created in opposition to the campus environment aimed at

policing Black womanhood (Njoku and Patton 2017). Herein lies HBCUs' potential as spaces for self-definition through encouraging a multiplicity of Blackness and Black gender and challenging social structures that inherently marginalize Black students.

DATA AND METHODS

This research consists of thirty in-depth, semi-structured interviews with cisgender heterosexual Black women enrolled as undergraduates at a four-year HBCU in the southern US, which I refer to as Hillman College.⁴ My identity as a twenty-something HBCU-educated Black woman played a significant role in building rapport with the women interviewed. Most participants automatically considered me an “insider.” Phrases such as “Girl, you know” or “I’m sure you remember” were common occurrences during interviews. Participant responses reflected assumptions about shared experiences as an HBCU undergraduate and as a (presumably heterosexual) Black woman, prompting me to ask for elaborations frequently during interviews. Despite sharing some identities with interviewees, I remain cognizant of “gradations of endogeneity” in data collection and analysis, acknowledging that though I share race and gender identities with participants, I occupy other social locations and experiences that may differ from theirs (Johnson 2013; Nelson 1996). As a token of appreciation, each participant received a \$20 electronic gift card.

I recruited participants through a campus-wide email list service containing enrolled students and screened them to confirm eligibility based on study criteria. In all research communication, I explained that the study sought to better understand how heterosexual Black women at HBCUs think about and deal with dating and sex. I conducted interviews during a six-month period in

⁴ This is a reference to a prominent 1990s sitcom about life at a fictional HBCU.

2016. Women were given the option of being interviewed via phone or video call through a secure videoconferencing platform.

The use of technology for synchronous interviewing can be comparable to face-to-face interaction and offers some additional benefits. One notable benefit of virtual interviewing is that it occurs in one's own private, safe location. This allows participants to feel less pressured and be more responsive than in face-to-face interviews (Hanna 2012). Given the potentially sensitive topics undertaken in this study, such as sex and sexual health, this benefit is especially notable. Additionally, the use of virtual interviewing allows for flexibility in time and space. It opens possibilities in terms of geographic access to participants (Hanna 2012; Seitz 2016). There are, of course, drawbacks to this method. For example, access to non-verbal cues is limited in virtual interviews as participants' body language is not fully present via a webcam, which essentially captures a headshot, and not present at all over the phone (Holt 2010).

During interviews, I shaped discussions around several aspects of dating and sex on women's campus and in their personal lives. The interview guide explicitly addressed perceptions of eligible Black men, power and control in sexual encounters, and sexual health practices. Following Deterding and Waters (2018), I identified broad themes that reflected questions on the interview guide. I listened to each interview thoroughly and read each transcript line by line. During this process, I extracted phrases used by women to describe specific sexual and romantic experiences, desires, and feelings around them. I noted pauses, hurried responses, laughter, and indications of emotions such as frustration, sadness, resentment, and happiness while listening to interview recordings. To further assist in the analysis, I wrote one- to two-page memos that elaborated on themes that appeared across multiple women's transcripts. Some of these themes included class mobility, respect, marriage, vigilance, agency, and ideas about sexual

responsibility. Using an abductive approach, I then applied emergent themes as a lens to examine each of the transcripts (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). This method allowed me to see the moves women made to pursue their sexual and relational desires as they confront intersectional inequities.

All women reported having had sexual intercourse with a man at least once within the last twelve months; however, their relationship statuses and context of sexual involvement varied. None of the women had ever been married or had children. The majority ($n = 28$) described their most recent sexual encounters in the context of ongoing involvements. The remaining two women described their most recent encounters as one-time hookups, both with men off-campus they knew from high school. Table 2 provides pseudonyms and characteristics for each participant.

In the following section, I present my analysis of three different strategies that HBCU women relied on to pursue romantic and sexual encounters that aligned with a particular performance of Black middle-class womanhood.

FINDINGS

Hillman women expressed being eager about the prospects for sexual and romantic interactions with Black men on similar educational and career trajectories upon entering college. Such romantic arrangements would presumably provide pathways for satisfying sex and romantic intimacy while protecting sexual health and reputation, essential for accomplishing Black ladyhood. Twenty-eight of the thirty women interviewed were currently seeking a monogamous, committed relationship. The remaining women stated that they were open to this relationship structure though not actively seeking it at this time. Women described the HBCU dating pool's novelty, having come from various backgrounds, including low-income Black

neighborhoods, wealthy predominately white high schools, small towns, and large metropolitan areas. They found their HBCU campus to be unlike other sexual landscapes they had experienced, as it was filled with an assortment of Black men who appeared to match women's sexual and romantic desires and who were similarly on a path into the Black middle-class. Many fantasized about "Hill Houses," coveted marriages between Hillman women and men that are considered quintessential Black middle-class partnerships, even before getting to campus. Maya, a sophomore, explained the lure of this romantic arrangement:

A lot of people come into Hillman wanting that relationship because it's so idealistic, right. You have strong Hillman women who are independent and will change the world, and you have these strong men who are gentlemen. Ideally, a Hillman couple should be a power couple. It's something that's held in high regard here. To be able to say, "Oh, I have a Hill House relationship," is almost like a badge. It's the epitome of the Hillman experience.

Hill House marriages are embedded in the culture of this school and HBCUs collectively and are considered a venerable tradition. Such relationships reflect idealized Black middle-class gender performance and demonstrate the racialization of romantic partnering, highlighting how closely Black women tied family formation and racial progress. However, women asserted that Hillman's sexual and dating environment was trying. While women wanted and pursued romantic and/or sexual monogamy, many believed that these partnerships were not easily obtainable on their campus.

Women characterized Hillman as a challenging dating and sexual terrain that required a great deal of vigilance to navigate effectively. Women encountered threats to their sexual health from men's concurrent sexual activity; close sexual networks; dilemmas about enactment of sexual agency, a consequence of race, class, and gender ideology about sexual control; and risks to their social reputation, which are attributable to concerns about visibility and policing of Black middle-class gender performances on campus. Women's negotiations of their sexualities

required them to be “cautious,” “smart,” and “safe” to protect claims to Black ladyhood. I posit that heterosexual HBCU women deploy sexual navigation strategies to mediate social and sexual risks while pursuing satisfying romantic and sexual relationships with men of equal social status according to a particular performance of Black womanhood.

Three main sexual navigation strategies emerged from the women’s accounts of sexual encounters at HBCUs: opting out, paying to play, and calling the shots. Opting out is the move to forgo sexual and romantic involvement with men on campus, pursuing relationships elsewhere. The remaining strategies are employed by women while involved with Hillman men. Paying to play entails adherence to female passivity despite perceived pitfalls. Calling the shots, by contrast, is a strategy whereby women actively pursue agency to navigate sexual and romantic encounters. These typologies could not be explained by demographic or social characteristics of the women themselves, such as age, class of origin, or context of sexual involvement. Rather, they are strategies that women deployed based on experiences from their dating and sexual lives on campus.

Further, the strategies are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The data suggest that women use varying sexual navigation strategies, even throughout involvement with a single man, as their perceptions of vulnerability shift or a strategy proves too challenging to execute, fails to accommodate their realities, or does not provide the outcome they desired. Twenty women reported using only one strategy. Ten women reported deploying two of the identified strategies. None of the women described using all three. These strategies demonstrate moves that HBCU women make, navigating the matrix of domination in pursuit of sex and romance.⁵

⁵ Kenley Brown (2013) uses “*moves*” to describe Black girls’ navigations of intersectional vulnerabilities in neighborhood and school environments.

Opting Out

Some women claimed that there was no way to protect themselves from the perils of dating and sex at Hillman. Consequently, they engaged in sexual and romantic relationships with men elsewhere, typically at nearby universities or in the city. Opting out encompasses a move not to be romantically or sexually involved with men on campus as a reaction to the constraints, risks, or dissatisfaction with Hillman's sexual landscape. Nearly two-thirds of the sample used this strategy at some point.

Much of the discontent women articulated involves the quantity of eligible partners. Women typically learned about the skewed gender ratio during their first weeks on campus. Some were warned by advanced women. For others, the imbalance became apparent as soon as new student orientation. Brianna, a senior, shared her estimation of the gender ratio:

There's definitely more women than men. Part of that is informed simply through the brother and sister exchange that we have. Actually, I want to say more than half of the men got three or four sisters because there's just that kind of imbalance. I would say even more so now [as an upper-level student]...I'll say it's six to one.

Most women interpreted the gender ratio to be much more skewed than campus statistics show. The perceived severity reflected ideas of a limited pool of desirable partners. These notions hold implications for students' assessments of the sexual landscape and inform dating behaviors. Women who opted out cited the pronounced gender ratio as a factor that heightened sexual vulnerability, as they saw it as impacting men's interest in exclusive relationships. They asserted that men "capitalize" on the ratio by attempting to have sex with as many women as possible in a four-year span. Women believed that Hillman men's concurrent sexual involvements increased potential exposure to sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Kelsey, a junior, explained that concerns about her sexual health discouraged her from dating at Hillman:

Sometimes girls end up sharing guys cause some guys are just dogs here. Going back to the female-male ratio, guys have more options than we do and probably have sex with a lot of girls, so everybody's having sex with each other, so everyone having sex is at risk.

Imbalanced gender ratios also contribute to sexual and romantic competition among heterosexual women at HBCUs and Black communities more widely (Collins 2004; Ferguson et al. 2006; Hall, Lee, and Witherspoon 2014). Destiny, and other participants, felt that they needed advantages over other women to secure relationships on campus, including altering their appearance to appease men, adopting more sexually permissive dispositions, or agreeing to sex under conditions they usually would not. Such rules of the game deterred some women from participating in their campus sexual landscape at all.

I do feel like there's more options to do things [for men]. Even if I was to get serious with somebody. Not that I feel any less of myself, but I feel that they might still do something with other females because the opportunity's there. There's more competition between females. They feel that okay, say I had my standards above that; I'm not going to do something with the guy who's not my boyfriend or things like that. There's that one girl who won't do that, but there's three other girls who will. She may loosen her standards a little bit just so that she wouldn't lose out on the opportunity because there's other girls who would do what she wouldn't do.

Strict codes of conduct police gender and sexuality, promote sexual propriety, and contribute to heightened surveillance by one's peers and university staff. Women contended that especially when it came to sex and dating, everyone on campus "knows your business." Many women believed that the only way to evade such policing was to avoid involvement with men on campus. For example, Candice did not want people on campus to know the details of her sexual life; opting out provided a way to have sex and date without jeopardizing one's social reputation:

Everybody likes to be in your business [on campus]. I date local guys because, well, no one knows them, and your business don't get around like that. I just think it's easier.

Opting out of dating Hillman men was used as a strategy to avoid social and sexual health risks while pursuing relationships on one's own terms when women did not believe this to be possible on campus. Notably, most women who dated off campus were involved with men who were demographically similar to Hillman men: Black, twenty-something, and recently or soon to be degreed. This highlighted women's belief that the institutional context amplified men's power and created barriers to obtaining what they desired while performing appropriate Black middle-class gender. In fact, women often mentioned that they were more than willing to date a Hillman man after he had graduated because they did not necessarily see the men themselves as the primary obstacle. Rather, it was Hillman's sexual landscape, in addition to the men's age/development, that intensified barriers to what they wanted.

For some women, opting out did, in fact, open avenues for sexual agency and mitigate sexual and social vulnerabilities. For example, sophomore Simone struggled for sexual agency while dating a Hillman man. Now romantically and sexually involved with a Black medical school graduate, she felt more in control of her sexuality and demonstrates agency as she desired:

I have been in a relationship before that I didn't have much control over. I feel that that relationships since then have been impacted by that. I wanted to have more control, be more straightforward about things, and not always be so passive. What I say is important, and it should always be taken into consideration, and just don't do something to please someone else.

While women opted out of involvement with Hillman men to solve their sexual and romantic woes, this strategy was no guarantee. Removing oneself from Hillman's dating pool did not inherently shield one from issues they wished to evade. In fact, this strategy created different dilemmas for Black middle-class gender performances than for women who remained involved with Hillman men solely. The few women dating men not enrolled in college or degreed described tensions between wanting a fulfilling sexual and romantic relationship and wanting a

mate of equal social status. For example, Naomi, a junior, remained sexually involved with her ex-boyfriend following their break-up. She enjoyed their sexual relationship and felt agentic, and through accounts of sexual encounters, demonstrated the ability to enact a great deal of sexual agency. However, she did not consider him a suitable match for a romantic partnership.

One of my things is you gotta be educated, have a plan, and things like that. He didn't finish school; he's just moving from job to job. I feel like my brain is like, "Okay, these are signs that could potentially affect how you want your life to go."

Like all of the women in the sample, Naomi wanted a comfortable middle- or upper-class lifestyle with a Black man who was educated and gainfully employed, matching her anticipatory status as a middle-class Black woman. However, interlocking systems of oppression shape college enrollment and upward mobility. Resulting campus dating populations and gender power imbalances on campus influenced Naomi's decision to pursue men elsewhere. Likewise, opportunities monogamous relationships with similarly situated partners are stratified for degreed heterosexual Black women in the general population (Clarke 2011). This presented a conundrum for HBCU women like Naomi, who could not get both the sexual and the romantic relationship she desired on campus or the partner she wanted off campus. Furthermore, lack of access to such partnerships jeopardized claims to Black ladyhood.

Paying to Play

Some women acted within the perceived constraints and risks associated with Hillman's sexual landscape by paying to play what they referred to as the game of dating and sex. Women who paid to play did not actively attempt to alter romantic and/or sexual involvements or their dynamics; they accommodated the sexual preferences and decisions of male partners. This strategy embodied an acknowledgment of and reliance on the rules of dating and sex on Hillman's campus and dominant notions of Black middle-class gender and sexuality. The price

to be paid for this way of pursuing heteronormative middle-class Black womanhood was often unfulfilling sexual and/or romantic involvements, minimization of sexual agency, or adverse sexual health outcomes.

Women relied on what they considered common knowledge and norms that were shaped in part by institutional endorsements of sexual respectability and responsibility. They drew on these as preventive measures for social and sexual risks. Direct communication with partners about sexual or relationship expectations (e.g., condom use) did not happen. Though many women, like first-year Monica, expected their male partners to provide and use condoms for sex, they seldom mentioned this to men, claiming common knowledge that STIs and pregnancy are to be avoided:

We haven't discussed condoms, but you know. It's an unspoken rule like, "Condoms are important. Nobody needs anything that's going to end up harming the other one or result in any pregnancies."

Jasmine echoed this sentiment, asserting that the university, through sexual health programming, dating and relationship events, and even academic courses, set a precedent for safer sexual encounters and made explicit requests for condom use redundant.

It really wasn't a conversation. It was just when we were about to have sex he pulled out the condom, and that was to be expected. I think Hillman does a really good job spreading sexual awareness and just being safe with it. It was just kind of one of those things that just comes with having sex with somebody.

In such instances, institutional norms upheld class rules, helping women adhere to Black ladyhood while lessening vulnerability to sexual and social risks. Consequently, women's mitigation of particular risks appeared fulfilled when their male partners initiated condom use and eliminated the need for negotiation. Unfortunately, however, men did not always hold up their end of the bargain.

In the absence of explicit discussions, reliance on norms frequently resulted in unwanted condomless sex. When Hillman men failed to initiate condom use as expected, women were left to figure out what, if anything, to do in the moment. The few who did verbalize discontent expressed difficulty asking men to use condoms or had their requests outright refused. Maya, a sophomore, described the struggle to voice these concerns to her partner:

Honestly, the very first time that we had sex, he didn't use a condom. I do remember saying, "Are you sure that you're going to be able to pull out in time," or whatever, "Are you positive?" I kept asking that, and I remember that, and he was, like, "Yeah, yeah. I can." After that, I kind of didn't say anything anymore because it was kind of like... I felt that was me hinting at him to, "You know, maybe you should put a condom on."

Upon recognizing a mismatch in expectations about condom use, she hinted about wanting to use a condom. However, she did not feel that she could explicitly request one because that would "ruin the flow." Women's accounts revealed presumptions about how sex *should* go. Dominant sexual scripts posit sex as organic and natural. Stopping a man to request a condom would disrupt the script *and* norms around sexual control, which she and other women did not wish to do. According to racialized gender and class rules, middle-class Black women are not supposed to be demanding in this arena. However, passivity often cemented a pattern for future acquiescence in sexual encounters and vulnerabilities.

Among women who paid to play, there was an acknowledgment that compromise was necessary in sexual or romantic involvement with men. To avoid conflict and secure romantic prospects, women defaulted to the desires of men with minimal objection. Consequently, women were compelled to sacrifice their wants and needs, sexual and otherwise, for the preferences and pleasure of men (Bontempi, Eng, and Quinn 2008; Foreman 2003). Women described having sex they did not want – or engaging in specific sexual acts they did not like at their partners' requests. For example, Kennedy recalled "giving in" to avoid conflict with her boyfriend:

I mean, it's been multiple times. I think that it's also the fact that, sometimes, when I say no, if he ask why then I realize I don't really have a true reason why. I just didn't feel like it at the moment. Then I eventually just give in. I don't want it to turn into an argument. I don't want it to turn into this big deal. At the same time, it's still my boyfriend. So I can't expect him not to ever bring up the idea of never having sex.

Because of their relationship, Kennedy believed that she was obligated to comply even when she did not wish to have sex. Similarly, Kiara, a senior, discussed continuous condomless sex with her ex-boyfriend despite concerns about her sexual health:

It was clear basically when he wanted to have sex without a condom. I was like, "No, no." He was doing it anyway. I was nervous because I felt like I'm going to be pregnant right after this. I was so scared. Every time that we had sex without a condom, I would go get a pregnancy test. It was just nerve-wracking. I think that's another way I kind of gave him a lot of power. He liked it, and I was just going along for the ride.

Paying to play prioritizes men's pleasure and often resulted in women expressing ambivalence or regret about sexual activities. Aaliyah, a junior, reflected on her struggle to maintain her on-again, off-again romantic relationship with a Hillman man, eventually having sex with him under coercive circumstances:

I feel like I was being pressured into having sex, and it wasn't really what I wanted at the time, and I just kind of did it, and I regret making that decision and not waiting until I was ready. I feel like I wasn't completely secure in our relationship.

Throughout her interview, Aaliyah struggled to articulate why she had sex with her boyfriend despite feeling pressured and suspicious that he may have been involved with other women on campus. Her interview revealed perceived competition with women seeking a committed, monogamous relationship, and potentially with her partner. Such a threat could cue adherence to dominant gender rules, prompting concession to secure a more stable relationship, her man, and a path to Black ladyhood.

Racialized, classed, and gendered sexual politics are intrinsically tied to accomplishing respectability and respect. Even when Black men violated the middle-class rules of sexuality, Hillman women felt the burden of upholding them to disprove notions of Black promiscuity. Compelled to perform heteronormative Black middle-class womanhood in the face of limited prospects, women remained involved with Hillman men that did not meet their sexual and romantic needs. For example, Shawna, a senior, contracted an STI, which led to discovering her boyfriend's infidelity. Yet, she maintained a sexual relationship with him after their break-up:

We still talk⁶, even though we shouldn't. We're not together for a reason. We should not be together at all. We should not be doing the things that we were doing, situationship, relationship, whatever, since we're not in that.

When queried about the continued involvement, Shawna offered that "it's convenient" and "safe," compared to finding another man on campus with whom to be sexually involved. Women emphasized the significance of "knowing" one's partners, as this provided assessments of sexual and social risks in an institutional climate that they felt created heightened vulnerability for Black women. She was pessimistic about the prospects of finding a new partner, who would in any case come with similar and unknown risks, including lack of discretion and STIs. Thus, continuing to talk to a man who would not commit to her was less threatening to her aspirations to Black ladyhood than searching for someone who might treat her better.

Similarly, first-year Danielle described remaining involved longer than she "should've" with a Hillman man after finding out that he slept with another woman on campus:

I wasn't just going to automatically hop on somebody else. It's sad, but I didn't want to sleep with anybody else because of the respect I have for myself. A lot of females out here feel like, "Okay, I'm not messing with him, so I'm going to just

⁶ Women used *talking* and *situationship* to describe romantically, and often sexually, involvements that are not official relationships. These liaisons were viewed as (1) a stage in the relationship formation process, (2) an avenue for a potential monogamous, committed relationship down the line—should the circumstances permit, or (3) a distinct arrangement.

go and mess with somebody else, you know?” It just builds a reputation, and I don’t want a reputation for myself to be known as sleeping around with guys. Especially not at Hillman because everybody knows somebody, somehow.

Danielle believed her continued involvement with this man guarded her sexual reputation and claims to respectability. She demonstrated an understanding of what she later referred to as a sexual double standard, that women are perceived differently than men relative to if and how soon one becomes sexually involved with another person. This expectation was particularly salient in an environment where the details of one’s sexual and romantic dealings are carefully monitored, reported, and considered critical to the impact of one’s sexual activities on racial stigma. Moreover, this pressure highlighted the constraints that expectations of heterosexual monogamy place on Black women to fulfill appropriate racialized gender, class, and sexuality. Further, both Danielle’s and Shawna’s declarations of what they should and should not be doing provide insight into beliefs about how romantic and sexual relationships are supposed to go after infidelity though their accounts revealed otherwise. Other studies have suggested that because of the imbalanced gender ratio, women at HBCUs expect their partners to be involved with multiple women (Ferguson et al. 2006; Hall, Lee, and Witherspoon 2014). The women in my sample did not expect this to happen. In fact, they expressed a belief that “cheating” should result in severing romantic and sexual ties, as it breaks the social contract of monogamy necessary for protecting middle-class identities. However, cheating was often excused for the sake of maintaining the relationship or relationship prospect. In a sense, remaining in these involvements served to navigate the sexual terrain of Hillman by guarding women’s reputations and eliminating the need to find new partners in a context where respectable gender performances and sexual propriety required monogamy, especially for women. One could risk finding a new partner too soon and call into question their sexual morality or wait too long to secure a romantic/sexual partner when few opportunities exist.

Calling the Shots

Hillman women emphasized the importance of standing up for oneself in romantic and sexual interactions, not “lowering standards,” and not allowing oneself to relinquish power in sex and dating. The final strategy, calling the shots, prioritized oneself, one’s agency, and one’s sexual health. Using this strategy, HBCU women asserted that navigating their campus required sexual agency, demonstrated through establishing and maintaining sexual control and assuming total responsibility for social and sexual risks.

Calling the shots typically began with communicating candidly about expectations for sex with partners before and throughout the involvement. Hillman women facilitated this by creating ground rules, which provided an avenue for setting and maintaining boundaries for sexual and romantic involvement. Women described discussions of ground rules with partners as a way to create open lines of communication about sex, allowing them to navigate interactions with more agency, to feel more informed in sexual decision-making, and to aid in pleasure-seeking. Though all ground rules were not related to sexual health concerns, the most common of them, related to condom use and sexual exclusivity, underscored the heightened vulnerability women felt in sexual arrangements with Hillman men and the precariousness of Black ladyhood, which are threatened by meanings assigned to STIs and unintended pregnancy. Tiffany, a sophomore, explained the importance of ground rules:

I feel like you need to be upfront with your expectations. You’re better able to move forward on the second page, or you’re able to recognize that you have to be on the same page with someone to be your sexual partner. It’s my body. I appreciate it. My body is my temple, but even more importantly, I want to make sure that anytime I cross over that line that we’re both on the same page because my life is a lot greater than fifteen or so minutes.

Tiffany, like other women, used ground rules to clarify expectations for sex and romance, protect her sexual health, and maintain her reputation and self-respect. While women used this

approach to guard claims to Black ladyhood, establishing and enforcing ground rules is above all else an enactment of agency. This process reflects both adherence and resistance to ideology that upholds narrow parameters for sexual respectability yet marginalizes Black women's sexual pleasure and decision-making. That is, while Hillman women's attempts to mitigate risks were informed by Black middle-class rules, they still aimed to be agentic in these endeavors and moved even further to engage in decision-making that facilitated pleasurable sexual and romantic experiences.

Despite their efforts, women's ground rules were often met with opposition from partners, leaving women constrained by the men's desires and dominance. Alicia, a first-year student, described a common occurrence women faced: pushback when requesting a partner be tested for STIs prior to sex:

I just told him that it was something that I needed him to do because I know that he used to have sex with his ex without condoms. I don't want to be in an office that tell me, "Everything came back negative but this, or but that." We had a little argument about it because he didn't want to get tested. He was like, "I refuse to get tested. If you don't trust me that much, then we don't have to do it." I explained to him, "It's not that I don't trust you. But if you respect what I want, you would do it." After a couple more minutes of us arguing, he was like, "I'll take the test. Let's go."

In the face of her partner's resistance, Alicia remained adamant about STI testing to protect herself, and he eventually agreed. For many women, the issue of respect extended outside of oneself to their partner. They implied that yielding to enactments of sexual agency were acts of respect. Seemingly, calling the shots sought to go beyond being *seen* as respectable and demanded respect from Black male partners. Collins (2004) notes that in a society where Black women have been socially, culturally, and historically devalued and rendered unworthy of love, respect, and agency, such a claim constitutes a rebellious act. Therefore, it is not surprising that

men frequently challenged women's opposition to racialized gender rules to reestablish heteromasculine dominance.

Not all women who faced resistance while calling the shots resolved these dilemmas in ways that met their needs. Some women recounted partners' rebuffs of ground rules altogether or men's violations after agreement. For example, Jocelyn established sexual exclusivity with her partner early in their involvement. Per their agreement, he was permitted to "talk" to other girls as long as things were not sexual. Jocelyn later discovered that he had become sexually involved with other women without disclosing it to her.

I asked him again did he have sex with anybody or was I the only person that he'd been having sex with since we've been talking. And he was like, no, and then I found out that he had sex with someone. I honestly didn't think that he was having sex with anybody, so it was like I misjudged him, which hurt on my behalf because I don't allow myself to misjudge people. It was like, "You let yourself slip up."

Jocelyn could not control the actions of her partner; yet she felt responsible for "misjudging" him and placing her reputation, emotional well-being, and sexual health at risk. Ideally, calling the shots necessitates unyielding agency to respond to sexual and social risks—seen and unseen—but some things are simply not capable of being controlled (e.g., men's behaviors or concealment of behaviors). Still, women who called the shots assumed complete responsibility, compelling vigilance to avoid threats. Consequently, calling the shots can place women in a predicament: stand their ground by severing ties when men violate boundaries, or maintain the involvement, risking further violation of rules and relinquishing power. Here, the seemingly incongruent racial, gender, and class repertoires are not helpful to resolve such a dilemma. Remarkably, both docility and dominance in this context can further jeopardize adherence to heteronormative performance of Black ladyhood by potentially endangering the relationship and by acting against class-based gender rules that call for submission.

As with the other strategies, calling the shots did not ensure the desired outcomes. In some cases, this strategy could not accommodate women's realities, resulting in deployment of a different strategy, such as opting out of Hillman's dating pool or relinquishing sexual agency and paying to play, like Jocelyn later moved toward. Conversely, not all women who called the shots in their sexual involvement with men on campus initially used this strategy. After unwanted experiences, such as STIs, pregnancy scares, or discovery of men's concurrent partners, some women changed strategy in attempts to navigate romantic/sexual encounters more effectively.

In these cases, women's enactment of sexual agency was most often through condom negotiation, highlighting what they believe to be a shift in vulnerability caused by HBCU men's failure to adhere to class rules around monogamy. Women resolved that such a restrictive performance of Black middle-class womanhood did not protect against sexual or social vulnerability; thus, they attempted agency to demonstrate sexual responsibility and to mediate sexual health risks. For example, although Shawna continued her sexual relationship with her ex-boyfriend despite discovering his sexual involvement with other women, she began to request condoms, even providing ones she received from student health services. She recounted his surprise and disdain at her request to use a condom in a post-breakup sexual encounter.

I pulled out the condom. He was like, "What's that?" I said, "A condom. You still don't know what those look like?" He was like, "Do we have to use them?" I said, "Well, I thought you were having sex with other people?" He said, "Yeah, I'm having sex with other people." Then I said, "Whatever. Just put the condom on." He put the condom on, and then we had sex. It was very boring.

Shawna and other women expressed concerns about sexual safety or health to male partners by emphasizing known sexual activities with other women or recalling a threat to respectability made "real," such as contracting an STI or needing emergency contraception. In some instances, men obliged yet were disgruntled about women's departure from a gender

performance that allowed them unbridled power. This discontent often manifested itself in unsatisfactory sexual encounters for women.

DISCUSSION

This article describes three sexual navigation strategies used by Black heterosexual women to navigate tensions between their romantic and sexual desires and the realities of sexual landscapes of HBCUs. As they pursued sexual and relational involvement, HBCU women attempted sexual decision-making within structural constraints by cycling through these strategies. Most women resolved to remove themselves from the campus dating pool and become romantically and/or sexually involved only with men off-campus at some point or another. This underscores women's perception that their campus context exacerbated unmanageable gender power imbalances yet reveals their continued investment in a particular relationship structure. Women who remained romantically and sexually involved with men on campus enlisted divergent strategies for addressing dilemmas in dating and sex. One strategy, calling the shots, highlights interactional processes whereby HBCU women resist gender power imbalances through active pursuit of sexual agency. Another strategy, paying to play, does not seek to challenge gender power imbalances. Instead, it seemingly aligns itself with notions of appropriate Black-middle class gender that permit men's control over the circumstances of romantic and sexual involvement, often at the expense of HBCU women's sexual health. With the data collected, I was unable to explore the particularities of circumstances under which shifts in strategy occur. Future studies may benefit from life history or longitudinal interviews to more thoroughly explore changes in HBCU women's negotiations sex and dating during and after matriculation.

Some women did describe satisfying sexual and romantic encounters at the time of the interview. However, none of the strategies reliably secured the involvements women desired as they transition into Black middle-class adulthood. Many women had similar experiences: partners who engaged in sexual activity with other women, ambivalent or unwanted sex, or unsatisfying sexual and romantic involvements. Restrictive race, class, and gender ideologies, pervasive racialized gender power imbalances, and social conditions that stratify access to romance and sex disadvantage Black women in heterosexual encounters on and off HBCU campuses (Anakaraonye et al. 2019; Clarke 2011, Collins 2004).

HBCU women's negotiations of sex, dating, and sexual health constitute a gendered racial project that attempts to refute problematized Black sexuality and gender and maintain class boundaries between working-class and middle-class Black women (Barcelos 2018). While symbolically valuable, monogamous heterosexual relationships are also propagated to women as antidotes for potential personal and social vulnerabilities. Monogamy and heterosexuality are endorsed as low risk in romantic, sexual, and sexual health discourse. Pregnancy outside of heterosexual marriage, STIs, and reputation of sexual promiscuity threaten adherence to conventional Black middle-class womanhood and legitimate claims to Black ladyhood. Women view monogamous committed partnerships as a means to engage in sexual activity while protecting sexual health, guarding social reputation, and establishing gender performances that align with the image of the middle-class, educated "new Black lady" (Collins 2004).

Yet heterosexual HBCU women find themselves at an impasse because access to the kinds of relationships they want – and need for class, gender, and racial projects – is blocked (Hamilton and Armstrong 2021). Women felt that the onus was on them to protect themselves from social, emotional, and sexual risks while navigating sexual and romantic involvements that

demonstrate responsibility, respectability, and prescription to the heteronormative Black womanhood endorsed by their institution. While women view sexual agency as a way to resolve this bind and navigate treacherous sexual terrains, such enactments were in tension with appropriate Black middle-class sexuality and were policed by the women, their peers, and their partners. HBCU women are immobilized by these structures, which inform what they desire and dictate how they should pursue it. Such perspectives can reify women's sexual concerns and meanings as inherent rather than cultural products constitutive of gender, race, and class. In this case, the focus on Black women's heterosexual disadvantage challenges the centrality of heterosexual monogamy to Black middle-class womanhood.

This paper expands current work on college heterosexuality by examining how campus environments shape dating and sexual experiences. Intersectional approaches are necessary to consider the complex ways that institutional climates are shaped by social, historical, cultural, and political processes, creating backdrops for sexual interaction. Heterosexual Black women at HBCUs simultaneously navigate sexual health risk factors characteristic of college environments such as inconsistent condom use and close sexual networks (Foreman 2003; Hall and Tanner 2016) and factors that impact women in Black American communities more broadly, such as limited numbers of male partners, gender power differentials, and known or unknown man-sharing (Alleyne and Gaston 2010; Ferguson et al. 2006; Hall and Tanner 2016). Studies of HBCU landscapes can provide better understandings of sexual health inequities among Black students, who are often underrepresented on non-HBCU campuses and in related studies. This paper affirms HBCUs as essential sites for investigating the reproduction and resistance of inequities through highlighting how tactics to traverse interlocking systems of oppression and promote racial uplift contribute to sexual health inequities through gendered racism.

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CHAPTER 5

“Keep Your Eyes Open:” HBCU Women’s Peer Sexual Advice and the (Re)production of Vigilance

INTRODUCTION

Young Black women in the United States continue to experience disproportionate rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV, with the primary mode of transmission being heterosexual intercourse (Centers for Disease Control 2019). Much attention has been paid to pervasive sexual health inequities in poor and working-class communities (Foreman 2003). However, these patterns are mirrored in collegiate environments, which do not adequately protect upwardly mobile Black women from adverse sexual health outcomes (Hou 2009; Lewis et al. 2000). Because of the dearth of research on the sexual experiences and health of Black college women, the development of effective interventions for this population is stalled (Younge et. al 2013).

Environments at HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) hold great potential for contributing to sexual health equity, yet they remain overlooked as significant sites for these efforts. Heterosexual HBCU women’s negotiations of sex and sexual health are shaped by this distinct setting, where they simultaneously navigate sexual health risk factors characteristic of college environments, including inconsistent condom use and close sexual networks (Alleyne 2008; Foreman 2003); factors that impact African American communities more broadly, such as limited numbers of male partners, gender power differentials, and men’s known or unknown concurrent sexual partners (Ferguson et al. 2006; Hall and Tanner 2016;

Wingood and DiClemente 2000); and campus environments that maintain restrictive rules around gendered sexuality (Njoku, Butler, and Beatty 2017; Wade 2008; Warren-Jeanpierre, Sutton, and Jones 2011). At the individual level, Black HBCU students report high rates of protective factors, such as STI knowledge, perceived risk, and testing, compared to college students of other racial/ethnic groups (Buhi, Marhefka, and Hoban 2010; Hou 2009).

Nonetheless, these students tend to experience higher STI rates compared to white students at other institutions. Further, epidemiological studies contend that HBCU campuses may serve as bridges between what have traditionally been considered high- and low-risk populations through Black collegians' sexual involvements (Hightow et al. 2005). The growing body of literature on HBCUs and sexual health warrants attention to how institutional and structural factors influence Black collegians' sexual experiences and health (Younge et al. 2013).

Moreover, sexual health promotion efforts should consider how this critical population engages existing messages about their sexuality. Preventative sexual health, whose primary goal is minimizing exposure, dominates institutional and cultural approaches to sexuality. These approaches situate particular sexual activities and the sexualities of particular groups as non-normative and risky, enforcing hegemonic ideals against which marginalized groups are measured by which they are disciplined (Ford 2017; Josephson 2016). Whiteness, heterosexuality, and sexual restraint are benchmarks by which a "good sexual citizen" is constituted through the public imagination, discourse, and policy and reified through sexual regulation and societal messages that privilege heterosexual monogamy and promote racial hierarchies (Schippers 2016).

Specifically Black women, who have been depicted as "Jezebels" and "Welfare Queens," come to be defined as a population that is at risk of engaging in deviant sexual behaviors and

poor decision-making to the detriment of ourselves and broader society (Collins 2002). Consequently, negotiations of one's sexuality may be especially perplexing for Black college women, who contend with the ways race and gender oppression intersect to frame social meanings around their sexual practice and the consequences for health (Leathe et al. 2021; Stephens and Phillips 2005). In these negotiations, Black women must confront both mainstream (white) and culturally specific (Black) norms of femininity. Black women's exclusion from conventional white middle-class notions of femininity could theoretically permit freedom from these standards, but marginalized racial status present constraints. Black femininity is formed in the context of interlocking systems of oppression that color the expectations and experiences of Black women. Strength has been emphasized as a central part of Black women's identity and survival as transgenerational tools for coping with gendered racism. Accordingly, the strong Black woman schema shapes expectations of Black womanhood that oblige self-reliance, emotional regulation, and sacrifice (Jones, Harris, and Reynolds 2021; Watson and Hunter 2015). Conversely, Black women are simultaneously socialized to embody traditional white gender norms, such as female submission and passivity. HBCU women thus manage seemingly incongruent frameworks for constructing standards of gendered sexuality.

The current research draws on peer advice about sex and dating to examine how heterosexual Black women at HBCUs consider their sexuality in the face of intersectional health inequities. HBCU women's advice to hypothetical first-year women embodies a discourse of vigilance, reflecting anxieties around the impact of gendered racism and problematized sexualities. Women engage racialized risk discourse, safe-sex rhetoric, and notions of appropriate Black femininity to simultaneously resist and reinforce existing social hierarchies used to marginalize them. I argue that dominant public health approaches that rely on

individualistic, behavioral constructions of risk are inadvertently detrimental and work to restrict rather than promote holistic sexual health among young Black women.

DATA AND METHODS

This study draws on thirty in-depth, semi-structured interviews with cisgender heterosexual Black women enrolled as undergraduates at a four-year HBCU in the southern United States, which I refer to by the pseudonym Hillman College.⁷

HBCUs are institutions “established prior to 1964, whose principal mission was, and is, the education of Black Americans” (National Center for Educational Statistics 2019:16). There are currently over 100 HBCUs in the United States and the Virgin Islands. With many institutions founded shortly after the end of slavery and under legalized segregation that denied Black students admission to historically white institutions (HWIs), these colleges and universities became the principal means for higher education for Black Americans. Today, HBCUs enroll approximately 10 percent of Black undergraduates and produce almost 20 percent of Black graduates. They remain important fixtures in Black communities and the nation because of their educational, social, religious, and political leadership. Considering HBCUs’ historic and contemporary commitments to racial uplift and attention to racism and the implications of such commitments for their students’ lives, these institutions are still considered safe havens from racial tensions that one might experience while matriculating at HWIs. Though Black women continue to make up the largest proportion of the students at these schools, feminist scholars contend that particular attention to issues related to racism often eclipses the significance of gender inequities on campus (Glenn 2019; Grundy 2021; Patton and Njoku 2019).

⁷ This is a reference to a prominent 1990s American sitcom about life at a fictional HBCU.

I recruited participants through a campus-wide email list service containing all enrolled students and screened to confirm eligibility based on study criteria, including race, gender, age, and sexual identity. Additionally, eligible participants were required to report having had sexual intercourse with a man in the past twelve months. Each participant received a \$20 e-gift card as a token of appreciation for their time and contributions to the study. I removed potentially identifying data and assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. Table 1 provides characteristics of the participants. Communication explained that the purpose of the study was to better understand how heterosexual Black women at HBCUs think about and deal with dating and sex. I conducted interviews during a six-month period in 2016. I interviewed women via phone or video call through a secure videoconferencing platform. Interviews were audio recorded and professionally transcribed.

Participants seemed to readily attribute insider status to me based on aspects of my identity that they assumed (age and sexuality) or that I revealed (HBCU alumna status) in the research process. Though I shared race, gender, and class identities with participants, I remained cognizant that my status as a researcher contributed to my status as an outsider—what Nelson (1996) refers to as “graduations of endogeneity” (Johnson 2013). I structured conversations around dating and sex on campus and in their personal lives more generally. The interview guide explicitly addressed perceptions of eligible Black men, power and control in sexual encounters, and sexual health practices. The current paper focuses purposely on advice about sex and dating gleaned from the final question of the interview with current Hillman women for hypothetical incoming first-year women at their college.

I listened to each interview thoroughly and read each transcript line by line to familiarize myself with the data. Further, I noted pauses, hurried responses, laughter, cues for emphasis such

as increased volume, slowed speech, or repetition, and indications of emotions including frustration, sadness, resentment, and happiness. Next, I wrote brief memos to elaborate themes across multiple transcripts or patterns in women's responses to specific interview items. Finally, using an abductive approach, I applied emergent themes as a lens to examine each of the women's transcripts (Deterding and Waters 2018; Tavory and Timmermans 2014). I drew on HBCU women's meanings of sex, dating, and sexual health as the basis for understanding these issues, aligning for the range of complexities that potentially influence them. Through Black feminist approaches, I center women's analysis of their experience shaping identities while navigating matrices of domination (Collins 2002). My focus on Black women's talk considers ideological and material circumstances of sexuality and identity construction (Houston and Davis 2002).

In the next section, I present my analysis of how heterosexual HBCU women's advice about dating and sex are shaped by racial, class, and gender power inequities. Women's advice demonstrates both the resistance and reproduction of dominant discourses around sexuality, risk, and Black womanhood.

FINDINGS

Hillman women were aware of the social inequities that they faced as Black women and collegians. Moreover, they considered their sexual conduct as relevant for personal social status and the status of their racial group. Links between sex, dating, and risk were prominent in the advice they offer to hypothetical first-year HBCU women. Women described their campus sexual landscape as treacherous, and they highlighted myriad sexual and social vulnerabilities. Yet women saw themselves as responsible for their own protection. These conceptions highlight the tension between recognizing how social injustice shapes risk and the dominance of neoliberal

discourses, demanding that members of marginalized groups protect themselves as individuals from the effects of inequity. This individual orientation reinforces the race, class, and gender structures that produce vulnerability. Through assertions that heterosexual HBCU women must be “cautious,” “smart,” and “safe” to avoid danger, vigilance emerges as fundamental to how Black women construct sexuality and sexual health. Peer advice shows how HBCU women consider their role and the role of women like them in shaping sexual and social identities while navigating race and gender oppression. These overarching messages reveal racialized gender expectations about sexual responsibility through self-reliance and respectability through monogamy.

Always Put Self First: Discourses of Self-Reliance

Discourses of self-reliance are dominant in peer advice for sex and dating at HBCUs, reflecting hypervigilance as a proposed tool used for self-protection. According to participants, it is women’s duty to regulate their sexuality and take care of their sexual health. Contrary to traditional attributions of strong Black women that promote racialized gendered labor and sacrifice for the benefit of others, Hillman women’s advice emphasized prioritizing themselves, their interests, and their futures through assessing sexual health needs and being steadfast in pursuit of them. The advice of Raven, a senior, reiterated the importance of focusing on oneself, being persistent, and not being swayed by the influence of men:

The main thing I would say is to always put self first when it comes to any type of relations at Hillman. By putting self first, I mean look out for yourself. If you feel something is important to you, whether it be using condoms or the person you’re talking to needs to be tested or whatever, put that first. Don’t let somebody tell you, “I’m clean. I don’t talk⁸ to anybody else. We don’t need to use condoms. We don’t need to get tested.” Don’t let that change your views. Always put yourself first. Put

⁸ Women used *talking* to describe romantic, and often sexual, involvements that are not official relationships. These liaisons were viewed as (1) a stage in the relationship formation process, (2) an avenue for a potential monogamous, committed relationship down the line—should the circumstances permit, or (3) a distinct arrangement.

yourself first because at the end of the day, no matter what happens, you'll always end up with yourself.

The charge to “always put self first” is repeated several times in the excerpt and across interviews, and often, Raven slowed her speech to emphasize “you” or “yourself.” In this way, women underscore using one’s own best judgment and relying on themselves to navigate what they believe are inevitable obstacles. This rhetoric positions women as having the ability and obligation to determine their sexual health status.

Women’s advice highlights how persistent inequities contribute to the heightened stakes of Black women’s sexual lives for their social status. Participants expressed what they believed to be the interconnectedness of one’s sexual lives with the other realms of their life, specifically for class mobility. Incoming Black collegiate women are advised by their peers to focus on educational advancement and warned that “wrong” decisions, such as too much attention on sex, could be detrimental. Women are particularly directed to use reason in relational and sexual decisions and told that sex and dating can impair judgment. Destiny, a senior, was explicit in her advice about how women should manage their social status upon entering Hillman. She urged women to take control of their lives by carefully assessing potential sexual and romantic partners and the probability for derailments in identity construction:

Be 100 percent safe. Know who you’re dealing with and you’re messing with. Not to be scared to be cautious. You know, you’re coming for your degree, so that should be your main focus. Sometimes when you get into relationships, you start messing with certain people, your emotions start to play a part and sometimes you lose your logic. Be smart and cautious.

Through advice, women are implored to use what they know rather than what they feel to dictate their sexual and romantic lives. Destiny’s emphasis on logic reflects women’s adoption of the rational actor as critical to being a responsible sexual citizen. Personal responsibility and rational choice are cornerstones of both neoliberal and safe-sex discourse. Much public health

effort operates from a deficit model, assuming that individuals lack knowledge or skills or are otherwise impaired from adhering to designated, proper action. Peer advice to keep emotion in check further engages dominant risk narratives around making the “right” choices. Hillman women believed it necessary to police themselves and hold themselves to different standards of conduct due to gendered racism and the potential consequences. Additionally, these hegemonic ideals compel boundary work to distinguish oneself as a *good* Black woman whose sexuality is properly regulated, thereby challenging race and class-based controlling images that claim Black women’s hyper-heterosexuality are a barrier to mobility.

Women’s advice reflected disproportionate racialized gendered labor in preventing adverse sexual health outcomes and disproving notions of Black female sexuality as aberrant. However, women often invoked notions of Black male sexuality as problematic in accounts of dating and sex on campus, demonstrating the impact of racialized heterosexism on Black romantic interaction. While women in the sample desired and pursued sexual and romantic relationships almost exclusively with Black men, Hillman women revealed little confidence, and often blatant mistrust, in Black male partners. Women felt that they could rely only on themselves for protection, compelling vigilance in their sexual lives. Again, a discourse of self-reliance was constituted through peer advice for women to take sole responsibility for maintaining their sexual health. Without hesitation, Erica, a first-year student, offered succinct advice to other heterosexual HBCU women along these lines:

Get to know somebody before you give them your all. When it comes to dating at Hillman, keep your eyes open. Don’t trust easily. And don’t expect too much out of these guys at Hillman.

She, like many women, genders and racializes risk discourses that framed both the sexualities of young adults and Black Americans as inept and potentially dangerous. By

insinuating that young Black men, with whom most of them engage in sexual activity, may be unable and/or unwilling to facilitate “responsible” and “safe” sexual involvement, women were rendered solely accountable for consequences of this dynamic and for being prepared to mitigate risks.

For example, peer advice portrayed Hillman men as not responsible enough to know or relay STI status. Consequently, women were advised to actively seek out this information, even if that meant going so far as to request documentation of STI test results before beginning a sexual relationship. Brianna, a senior, stated that women cannot simply rely on what partners tell them to protect their sexual health effectively:

I would just say anybody who doesn't know the status of the person that they're sleeping with is most at risk. You just don't know. Yeah... it's just something that you have to know. You can't always rely on somebody's word. Still, somebody can have something and not even be aware. You just really have to have confirmation.

Though incoming first-years are urged to use their own best judgment and prioritize their own needs in sexual decision-making, it remains apparent how safe-sex and risk discourses inform what Hillman women believe are suitable approaches to sexuality. For example, Maya, a sophomore, drew on safe-sex discourse from university-specific programming to offer guidance for first-year women:

The one thing I would definitely say is, to not only use condoms, at least use one form of contraceptive. Even if you're on birth control, I would still say use condoms. I just really highly suggest that you don't have unprotected sex, of course. Not just that, know how to use condoms and know about, these different forms of STDs and how to protect yourself. That's something that's a huge deal, definitely at Hillman. We talk about it all the time. We have all types of seminars, “Condoms are free, you can get them from the Student Health Center.” There's really no reason that you shouldn't.

Maya's use of “of course” reflects internalization of norms for sexual activity rooted in ideals of a good sexual citizen and a good Black woman. The requirements include being

knowledgeable, responsible, and protecting oneself in sexual encounters by using condoms and other contraceptives. Refuting claims of problematized Black female sexuality is central to middle-class Black womanhood (Collins 2004). Hence, sexual responsibility and control are foundational to the elite Black female identity that middle-class aspirant college women in the sample aim to accomplish themselves and promote through peer advice.

Peer advice framed sexual desire as a potential pitfall for HBCU women's sexual lives and ultimately their social status. Hillman women urged hypothetical first-years to contain this, as they believed it could lead to sexual danger. Women's talk reproduced risk discourse that places desire as incompatible with sexual responsibility. In their view, restraint is necessary and entails being safe by using condoms, getting tested regularly for STIs, and being cautious about when and with whom one engages in sexual activity. Brittany advised women to consider how desire may interfere with the ways they should manage their sexual lives:

Be slow to having sex at Hillman. When I was a freshman, I thought Hillman was a candy store. I felt like a kid in a candy store just because there were so many Black guys. As someone who's fresh out of high school, I was just so—I don't want to say overwhelmed, but very intrigued by all of that. I think if I were less responsible, or maybe more willing to have sex with people, then I could've gotten in some really bad situations. I would just say try to use discernment and not be in a rush to have sex with everybody or whatever.

She asserted that desire tempted her to relax her sexual standards. Peer advice claimed that women were susceptible to pressure from male partners and permissive expectations around college heterosexuality and that they were naïve in navigating sexual and romantic encounters, particularly in the first year of college. Women drew on risk discourse to highlight what they believed to be their role in policing their sexuality, even if that meant repressing pleasure and desire.

Hillman women's peer advice embodied a discourse of self-reliance that pulled together dominant notions around sexual risk and Black womanhood, prompting vigilance in Black college women's sexualities and commanding them to assume total responsibility for their sexual health. However, self-reliance in the context of heterosexual interactions is complicated, as the dynamics require participation and buy in from male partners in what remains a key site of intersectional inequities. Nonetheless, peer advice positioned women and their efforts as the key determinants of sexual health. Further, women's self-reliance was shaped and challenged by discourses of sexual respectability. Women employed this to draw boundaries around appropriate sexuality and Black womanhood through their advice.

Find That One: Discourses of Mononormativity

Hillman women's vigilance was not only in service of preventing STIs and unintended pregnancy; it also served the purpose of protecting claims of sexual respectability and social status. Black sexuality has been constructed as hypersexual, irresponsible, and out of control. Further, dominant discourses position Black sexuality as immoral and blame the sexual practices of Black men and women for sexual health epidemics (Collins 2004). Middle-class Black womanhood is placed in opposition to these dangerous sexualities; thus, Black college women are charged with conforming to presumably white middle-class femininity to counter stereotypes of Black pathology and promote racial progress. As such, appropriate sexuality is constrained to committed, monogamous, heterosexual relationships. Such discourses construct and reinforce racialized, classed, and gendered notions of appropriate sexuality under the guise of health and risk reduction. Peer advice revealed how HBCU women drew on these notions to consider sexual practice and risk, placing sexual respectability at the center of their sexual and social identities.

Discourses of risk collided with Black femininity to underscore how women simultaneously manage sexual health and social status through racialized gender boundary formation.

Women were told to “be cautious,” particularly when and with whom they make their sexual debut on campus. According to peer advice, women should learn about prospective partners and their sexual histories, should be meticulous in partner selection, and should delay sexual activity. Peer advice insisted that women use this knowledge to assess men’s intentions and ultimately select suitable partners who do not pose a threat to their sexual health or social reputation. Advice encouraged utilizing components of Hillman’s sexual landscape to assist in these pursuits. Like many HBCU campuses, Hillman’s environment heavily polices sexuality through promoting racial respectability. Overwhelmingly, women in the sample identified surveillance of one’s sexual and romantic dealings by peers, staff, and faculty as a key characteristic of the campus landscape. This is useful for women to learn about men’s sexual and social reputations before becoming sexually involved. Kennedy, a sophomore, recommended that women seek out and use community information about men’s sexual lives in assessments of potential risks:

Just see for yourself. Know who they are. I think that’s a big thing to know who they are. Like I said, Hillman is small; everyone knows everything, you can easily find out who’s the last person they had sex with and if that person have anything going on. Also, if they sleep around! Multiple partners means multiple chances [for exposure].

One’s sexual activity and reputation denotes who the person is. Kennedy overwhelmingly stressed the role of individual behavior for sexual health, and relatedly, for fitness for heterosexual interaction. For example, one of the most prominent messages of safe-sex rhetoric reiterated by women was the association of increased sexual risk with multiple sexual partners. This reinforces connections between monogamy and sexual health.

Hyper-surveillance is a double-edged sword when it comes to HBCU women's sexual vigilance. On one hand, it informs women's sexual decision-making by shaping perceptions of men's sexual behavior and potential dangers that may accompany sex with them. On the other hand, hyper-surveillance perpetuates racialized and gendered rules around appropriate sexuality, compelling women to proceed with caution, as their own sexual dealings could just as easily be assessed and scrutinized by the campus community, threatening their social status. Women's advice reinforced sexual double-standards. Though men are presumed (however unfavorably) to be engaged in sexual activities with multiple women, often concurrently, Hillman women were advised to take care to limit their number of sexual partners while in college. Courtney, a senior, warned that women's social status could be tarnished by others' interpretation of their sexual activity:

Minimize sexual encounters with guys at Hillman because folks talk a lot. I just feel like you have to have really tough skin to stand up and be, you know, sexually liberated and really combat what most people are going to think. I would say to minimize sexual encounters with as many guys as possible.

Courtney's emphasis demonstrated that surveillance of one's sexual life is perhaps unavoidable on campus, which has implications for how women see themselves and want to be seen by others. Advice such as this reveals the role of mononormativity for regulating gender performance and social status rather than solely for STI and pregnancy prevention. For HBCU women, this may be even more salient due to racial stigma stemming from hypersexual controlling images of working-class Black womanhood, that they seek to distance themselves from for sexual respectability. Sexual liberation is held in opposition to restricting one's sexuality in one aspect or another. Moreover, advice suggested that such sexual practices are not wholly accepted on campus, which commands sexual propriety for women, thus heightening the

stakes of self-regulation. Women believed that the onus was on them to protect both their sexual health and their social status by limiting sexual desire to the confines of heterosexual monogamy.

The notion of “the one” reflects the centrality of heterosexual monogamy to both safe-sex rhetoric and Black womanhood. Discourses of mononormativity permeated women’s advice as they advocated finding “the right one” with whom to pursue a sexual, and ideally romantic, relationship. Further, they revealed a complex process based on gendered, racialized, and classed ways of understanding sexual respectability, responsibility, and social mobility (Garcia 2009; Ray 2017). Claims to respectability hinge on an acceptable sexual record—that is, having few partners, little sexual experience, and no STIs or unintended pregnancies. In this way, discourses of sexual risk work to accomplish sexual safety *and* labor to protect social status. Women advised peers to be careful and fully knowledgeable in vetting partners who would presumably facilitate a sustainable, safe, mutually monogamous involvement. First-year Ashley’s advice reflected the significance of a suitable partner selection for women:

Don’t just jump into something because you feel like you have to or because you feel like someone is forcing you. Really try and see who you actually like and stuff like that. I know a lot of girls that have just had sex basically with a lot of guys and they are freshmen as well so they basically just got here. I would say don’t do that. Be smart with who you plan on having sex with. Just find that one person that you’re really attracted to and make sure that they feel the same way about you because I’ve seen in a lot of instances these girls are really into these guys but they’re over here messing with four other girls or something like that. Just kind of really know who you want to be with.

Ashley, like other women, insisted that women trust their best judgment in the pursuit of a sexual partnership that can be enduring and satisfying. Advice not to have multiple partners but to seek “the one” supports mononormativity as the wise and appropriate way to pursue sex in college. “Wrong” decisions around partners and sexual involvement are implicated in faulty

decision-making, thus ascribing young Black women's troubles to their actions and decisions rather than to unjust systems.

Women claimed that finding "the one" takes much effort and time. According to the advice, waiting to make one's sexual debut at Hillman is a necessary exercise of caution. Some women advised peers to abstain from sex entirely during their first year on campus while they adapt to this new environment, while others urged women to approach sexual encounters deliberately, containing their desires. Moving too quickly toward sexual involvement was considered irresponsible and could come with unwanted consequences. Many women offered cautionary tales about friends or roommates who they say were overwhelmed by the newfound freedom that college granted them. Kiara, a senior who also served as a resident assistant in a freshman dorm, advised women to postpone sex until evaluating available opportunities for partnerships offered by the campus:

Don't date or have sex with the first guy who says, "I think you're cute." I would say even the first guy that you think is cute. You want to have options. When you get caught up in that one guy who you think is cute, they think you're cute, they're saying all this nice stuff to you, you're in a new environment where there's Black men everywhere, it gets a little fuzzy. I would definitely tell a freshman don't have sex with the first person that says, "I like you." Date them for a little bit, see what type of person they are. Just don't jump into bed with them in like, week two. Literally, every relationship that I've seen, even with my friends or with people who I know, anytime they date someone who was the first man they met when they got to campus or they ended up having sex with someone within a small amount of time as a freshman, it has never turned out right, they don't stick around. Literally never.

Kiara simultaneously recommended against focusing on one partner too soon without consideration of other potential partners and advised against engaging in sex too soon. Through this advice, women drew on discourses that dictate that young adults, particularly young Black women, are "at risk" of engaging in sexual behaviors that could be detrimental to their well-being. Moreover, women claimed that decisions made without contemplation will likely result in

unfavorable outcomes. As other women did, Kiara described how peers were devastated by what she considered the inevitable demise of sexual relationships that began hastily.

Embedded in women's peer advice are beliefs about the connections between sex and dating—that one should build a long-term, committed romantic relationship before introducing sex. Such advice demonstrates the complexities of college sexuality for Black women. Discourses of risk, college heterosexuality, and Black femininity converge in ways that complicate sexual rules and require close examination of how particular social environments inform them. While social scientists suggest that hooking up, prominent at HWIs, provides sexual solutions for college women's sexuality, these sexual cultures generally marginalize students of color along with queer and poor young adults on campus (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Spell 2016). As the dominant narrative of college heterosexuality privileges hookups, HBCU women dissociated with these sexual rules and viewed them as flawed. In doing this, Hillman women attempted to resist racialized images of their sexuality by drawing on dominant gender ideology that informs the good girl/bad girl dichotomy (Fasula, Carry, and Miller 2014; Garcia 2009). Through this strategy of positioning (white) college sexual cultures as problematic, HBCU women distanced themselves from the associated sexual practices and white college women who engage in them, signaling moral superiority, and normalcy despite racial subjugation (Espiritu 2001). Women thus employed resulting discourses of mononormativity as a path to sexually respectable identities that may otherwise be inaccessible because of their racial status.

DISCUSSION

HBCU women's peer advice on sex and dating demonstrates how race, class, and gender are implicated in normative understandings of sexuality and sexual health. Since categorization

lies at the core of prevention research, intervention, and health promotion, public health's predominately biomedical approach has defined healthy and normal sexual behaviors and designated at-risk populations. Conceptions of healthy sexualities are entangled with constructions of appropriate racialized gendered sexualities. Such discursive practices frame marginalized groups as "at risk" of engaging in sexual practices that increase adverse health outcomes and contribute to public health crises (Barcelos 2018; Garcia 2009). Consistent with neoliberalism, individuals are seen as solely responsible for amendment and self-regulation to reduce risk and maintain their own well-being (Elliot 2014; Epstein and Mamo 2017).

Women's hypervigilance reifies ideology around risk and pathology that operate to regulate Black women's sexuality. The impetus for self-protection, which is foundational to safe-sex efforts, is embedded in Black femininity as a consequence of intersectional inequities that create obstacles in all realms of Black women's lives. The strong Black women schema, especially, emphasizes personal responsibility and conceals the ways that institutions maintain inequity. Internalization leaves the impression that racialized gender inequity results from insufficient effort on the parts of young Black women, thus the onus is on them to keep themselves safe (Harris-Perry 2011; Johnson 2013). This is exacerbated through health promotion that tends to decontextualize sexual interaction and leave women culpable for their sexual health status, no matter what systematic disadvantages exist. On the other hand, women's calls for self-protection and preservation, rather than sacrifice, exhibit some resistance to mainstream white middle-class and Black femininities. This reflects the complex interactions between racialized class-based controlling images, dominant ideologies of appropriate gendered sexuality, and departure from both in HBCU women's negotiations of their sexualities.

Still, women engage dominant discourses of risk and sex in ways that reproduce existing hierarchies, promote racialized, gendered, and classed performances of appropriate sexuality, and constrain the potential for expansive sexualities. Calls for self-prioritization are limited in so far as they hold women to do so in accordance with predetermined socially accepted sexual standards. Constructions of Black sexuality as potentially dangerous and problematic are internalized and remain present mostly untransformed in peer dating and sexual advice. Hillman women's resistance to these discourses is reflected in efforts to promote a sexually respectable HBCU woman, wherein the standards for respectability are narrowly defined by standards for gendered sexuality that traditionally excluded Black women. Endorsements of monogamy thus provide a way to resist the problematization of their racialized hyper-heterosexualities. Mononormativity emerges as integral to constructions of sexual normalcy, legitimizing women's claims for respectability, and is also implicated in co-constituting race, gender, and class inequality (Schippers 2016).

Additionally, sexual health promotion is intrinsically tied to normalcy. Sexual risk discourse operates on the premise that capable, upstanding people practice "safe sex." Positioning oneself as a good Black woman obliges demonstrations and endorsements of personal responsibility and respectability as protection from adverse health outcomes viewed as threats to one's social status. This is cemented through public health efforts that narrowly focus on individual-level behavioral factors without critical attention to the roles of oppression, power, and privilege in structuring vulnerabilities for sexual health inequities. Accordingly, peer advice holds women to the task of being neoliberal agents who must manage their own socially structured risk. Through positioning the individual at the center of prevention strategies, they are identified as the cause and solution for potential public health concerns. This is especially

damaging for Black college women at the nexus of race and gender inequity, as it shames and blames them for “failure” rather than holding accountable the racist and sexist systems that fail them.

Risk narratives contribute to the omnipresence of danger, particularly in young Black women’s sexual lives, due to the problematization of their sexualities. Heterosexual HBCU women take up these discourses not just to manage their own sexuality but also, as advice reveals, to shape peers’ understandings around sex and dating as well. Dominant approaches frame sex as inherently risky, yet it is social injustice that poses the threat to Black collegiate women, not their sexual practice (Bay-Cheng 2010). This work does not intend to discount the role of individual health behavior or the potential for resistance at the microlevel, but to contextualize social determinants of sexual health and argue for reorientation of dominant public health approaches.

While the sexuality of Black women is hyper-visible in public health research and intervention in the sense that it centers on disease and our “risky” sexual behavior, more work is needed to critically engage the ways in which the field contributes to and justifies the marginalization of sexualities. Tendency toward shame and risk-based approaches to Black female sexuality contribute to vulnerability through the denial of sexual citizenship and disallowing Black women’s right to sexual self-determination (Hirsch and Khan 2020). Following the example of HIV activism built on justice, ongoing sexual health efforts should seek to address structural and cultural factors that manufacture illness and oppress sexuality. Public health must move beyond racialized discourses of risk to facilitate holistic and intersectional approaches to Black women’s sexual health (Barlow and Dill 2018). Development of sexual health promotion should be informed by Black feminist and reproductive justice

approaches that center Black women and account for the complexities of sociocultural, historical, and political backdrops that shape our lives and health. Black institutions, such as HBCUs, by virtue of their unique orientation for critical race consciousness, provides potentials for integrating positive sexuality through promoting self-definitions that challenge racial pathologization through affirming the vastness of sexuality and the universal right for respectable, pleasurable, and safe sexual experiences. Lastly, the specific expertise and situational awareness of Black women sex educators well-position them to foster comprehensive transformative approaches to sexual health. They should be commissioned for sexuality interventions for Black collegians rooted in inclusivity, sex-positivity, and empowerment (Flowers 2018).

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CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

This dissertation investigates the implications of racialization, gender, and class for sex, romance, and sexual health among heterosexual undergraduate Black women enrolled at an HBCU. These women walk a tightrope as they attempt to weave a coherent narrative about who they are and should become and as they work to balance the contradictions of being both Black and a lady. Sexuality takes center stage in these negotiations as a core site where mutually constituted systems of power and oppression intersect.

Negotiations of sexuality that embody respectability, responsibility, and resistance are entangled with hegemonic ideals that compel and rebuke the irreconcilable notion of a “good” Black woman. Heterosexual HBCU women are committed to the continuity of an elite Black feminine performance and attempt to navigate impossible standards and with minimal disruption to themselves and the social structures in which they are embedded. Ideological frameworks and social conditions place women in a predicament from the outset by regulating their sexual and relational aspirations, how they should pursue them, and what these mean for their identities. The specific racial, gender, and class boundary work required for these undertakings are often conflicting and reveal the precariousness of constructing heteronormative Black middle-class womanhood with limited schemas.

In this chapter, I summarize key findings from the dissertation articles. Next, I provide implications for sociological research and public health practice. Finally, I consider future directions for extending work in this area.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Though the HBCU campus seems ideal for satisfactory sexual and romantic connections for Black middle-class aspirant women, intersectional inequities, both inside and outside of the HBCU context, and rigid standards for respectability leave women with limited opportunities to obtain all that they desire. Moreover, the racial, class, and gender expectations articulated by their institutions and by society make negotiations of intimate relationships particularly complicated. Still, HBCU women draw on these narrow frameworks to adhere to racial respectability, gender expectations, and middle-class performance.

Chapter 3 examined how women considered the role and nature of their collegiate romantic and sexual involvement for social mobility and status. Women's aspirations for committed, monogamous relationships during matriculation were marked by attempts at class distinction, racial solidarity, and identity formation and were rooted in accomplishing respectable sexuality. Relationship goals were framed by heterosexist assumptions that position monogamy as the only proper context for sexuality within respectable Black middle-class womanhood. Thus, women wanted committed, monogamous relationships now and in the future. Yet, they strived to challenge the conventions of this male-dominant relationship structure in ways that supported the occupational expectations of their elite-status attainment and positioned their contributions to individual and racial advancement as significant. Women expected male partners to be as respectable and exceptional as they themselves were set on becoming. Likewise, women aimed to establish respectable sexualities and selves through the advice they offered to hypothetical first-year HBCU women, which I presented in chapter 5. As such, they were intent on challenging their marginalization and the pathologization of their sexualities. Attempts to assert control over the representation of their sexuality is a strategy for reclamation. However,

the tools whereby this was done reinforced social hierarchies. The very constructions that women sought to resist informed how they considered their sexualities and their peers. As demonstrated in all three dissertation articles, women policed themselves and others according to heterosexist, racist, classist, and sexist ideologies that infringed on their sexual subjectivity in exchange for claims to respectability. Their desires were constrained, and as a result of restrictive structures that regulated their sexuality, so were their outlets for satisfying sex and romance.

Pervasive gender power imbalances, skewed gender ratios, and hyper-surveillance, as manifestations of interlocking systems of oppression, stratified their sexual possibilities. With vested racial and class interests, women sought to clarify and uphold the constructed relationships between their heterofemininity and their partners' heteromascularity. Thus men's pursuits of sex outside of heterosexual monogamy was framed as both detrimental the racial, gendered, and classed expectations faced by Black collegians. That is, HBCU women critiqued male peers' sexual practices because these behaviors did not align with their understandings of respectable racialized class and gender supported by their institutional environment as respectable.

While their institution endorsed a particular heteronormative Black gender performance, HBCU women did not find the campus landscape wholly conducive for aligned romantic and sexual opportunities. Lack of access to this most desired, appropriate, and culturally available pathway for sexual propriety complicated HBCU women's pursuit of satisfying sex and romance. In chapter 4, I described women's efforts to adhere to these standards despite the obstacles. They almost exclusively confined their sexual activity to ongoing involvements in which monogamy was upheld, at least on their part. Women drew on diverse strategies as they navigated sexual and social risks with varying levels of effectiveness.

Risk was naturalized through racist, classist, and heterosexist ideology that framed Black sexuality and sex as inherently dangerous. Keenly aware of their vulnerability and with little entitlement to protection and care from unjust systems, HBCU women endeavored to protect themselves from the effects of gendered racism and misogynoir through the formation of an elite Black female identity. Women sought and advocated for individualistic solutions, as reflected in chapters 4 and 5, while contending with the impacts of structural and ideological constraints on their agency.

In chapter 5, I examined how HBCU women both resisted and reproduced discourses of racialized risk, respectable Black womanhood, and neoliberal approaches to sexual health. Women presented hypervigilance as fundamental to their sexualities. They believed and advised that as Black women, they must regulate their own sexualities, rely on themselves to navigate interlocking systems of oppression, and protect their social status. Women contended that if they made the “right” choices, they would be safe, and that if things did not go as planned, the responsibility was theirs. Yet, women’s heterosexual involvement revealed the futility of enacting the advice they offered other women. Despite their best efforts, self-protection in this manner proved trying, often requiring women to pivot, or stalling them all together in sexual decision-making. Though trampled by pervasive inequities, women took on much responsibility when things did not go as planned. The fallout may hold significant consequences for their social and sexual selves, and they felt culpable no matter the disadvantages they faced. This work displayed the violence marginalized groups endure under oppressive systems, which deflect the blame from broader social conditions to the individuals who suffer as a result.

This dissertation illustrates the connections between what heterosexual HBCU women think and do and the dilemmas they face in reconciling the contradictions that accompany

controlling images of Black womanhood. Prevailing sexual politics wreak havoc on HBCU women's capacity for self-definition and deny them the fullness of their sexuality. Moreover, these conceptions continue to impede undertakings of social justice within and beyond Black life, as the existing constructions of middle-class Black womanhood require opposition to negative depictions in ways that uphold race, gender, and class power. Despite sexual and class privilege, HBCU women's location at the nexus of racial and gender disadvantage grants them little control over the ideological apparatuses of society, impairing their ability to express, and perhaps imagine, alternatives that reject conceptions advanced by more powerful groups. Still, as women contemplate the incongruities of middle-class Black womanhood, there exist opportunities to stimulate deconstruction, resistance, and transgression in their consciousness, and ultimately their lives, to transcend the limitations of interlocking systems of oppression.

IMPLICATIONS

Implications for Sociological Research

The findings of this dissertation provide several implications for sociological research and public health efforts. Explorations of hooking up have dominated research of collegiate sexual experiences. While hookups are common, much sexual activity occurs in ongoing involvements. This holds important implications for negotiating sexual control and mediating health risks. My dissertation findings highlight the complexities of sexual experiences and relationship formation among undergraduates, providing essential insights into the nature of college heterosexuality and contributing to literature on sexual and romantic involvements that are not quite hookups or committed relationships.

Most prominently, my dissertation findings advance college heterosexuality scholarship through a focus on intersectional inequities. I respond to the call to include racially minoritized populations in this scholarship by centering the experiences of Black college women (Hall and Tanner 2016; Pham 2017) Rather than treating race as a variable of difference, I attend to racialization as a process through which individuals and groups' intersubjectivity and lived experiences at the micro-level are linked to the meanings constructed and organized at the macro-level (Itzigsohn and Brown 2015). Using intersectional frameworks, this study calls attention to the significance of racialization for structuring sexual practice and its intersections with class and gender power in Black collegians' sexual lives.

I do not take for granted the significance of racially homogenous spaces within a racialized society. HBCUs, like historically white universities, are manifestations of racial structure. The ways in which race matters within campus environments reflect the legacy of US race relations. HBCUs were founded with the premise of attending to and resisting white supremacy. These factors continue to shape their institutional goals and to dictate student experiences. Through investigation of HBCU landscapes, this dissertation expands understandings of how context matters for sexuality at the collegiate level. Additionally, attention to experiences of Black women where they are not underrepresented in the student population provides a critical vantage point for examining the manifestations of intersectional inequities for sexual and romantic opportunity.

The racialized location of the university makes Black college sexuality a prime concern for the sociology of race. Sexuality is also significant for racial identity formation and holds implications for later romantic and sexual trajectories. This dissertation aligns with assessments of love and sex as complex inequities that often elude race scholars and debates of racial

injustice (Collins 2004; Clarke 2011). Racial structures stratify these opportunities as they do other social goods, such as education and employment. Further, as demonstrated in the findings, the nature of dating, sex, and sexual health is intertwined with racial meanings and power relations. The intricate intersections of sexuality, gender, and class work to sustain racial order by constructing Black Americans as sexually deviant and potentially dangerous, thus justifiably subjugated.

This dissertation draws on Black feminist approaches to examine the intimate implications of anti-Black racism. I emphasize the ongoing relationship between Black college women's activism and subjugation in heterosexual interaction. Heterosexual HBCU women's negotiations demonstrate how the matrix of domination may be responsive to human agency, which holds incredible importance for the study and practice of gender and racial justice on campus.

Implications for Public Health Scholarship and Practice

Investigating and addressing oppression is essential to public health's stated goals and must be centered in research and practice. Applying Black feminist and intersectional frameworks elicits the complexities of social inequity, seeks to understanding underlying power systems that shape social conditions and vulnerability, and informs social justice intervention (Bowleg 2021). These perspectives point to problems at multiple levels of society and often the need for structural solutions. Thus, public health approaches must take seriously the ways in which race, gender, and class structures operate at multiple levels of social life to impact heterosexual HBCU women's negotiations of sexuality and consequently, their sexual health. Though such endeavors may be challenging, they are necessary for health justice in Black communities. While working to dismantle interlocking systems of power and oppression are

paramount, reorientation of health promotion and research to combat deficit-focused approaches and challenge social hierarchy can also assist in improving the sexual health of heterosexual HBCU women.

Health promotion reflects broader socio-cultural processes and is thus subject to oppressive structures that position white, cisgender, middle-class, and heterosexual as normative (Barcelos 2018; Green and Labonté 2007). Not only does this weaken the validity and efficacy of health promotion efforts, but it also renders the sexual practices of “others” as deviant and problematic (Abrams et al. 2020). Existing constructions of Black sexuality serve as a backdrop, not only for social actors but also for sexual health research and practice, which either resist or sustain them. Young Black women’s sexualities are often reduced to their risks of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections in public health scholarship and interventions. As this work demonstrates, this has been counterproductive to promotion sexual health and well-being and detrimental to how HBCU women approach sex and consider Black womanhood.

Moreover, the development of theory and evidence-based interventions are limited by the scope of existing research and practices conducted under these premises as they do attend to the full picture of Black women’s sexual lives thus operate within confines shaped by these assumptions. My dissertation contributes to a more complete picture of HBCU women’s sexual and narratives of normative sexualities for Black women. Further, I highlight how existing approaches to public health that marginalize their sexualities and treat those of white collegians as the default are insufficient. Intervention efforts should address the distinct social conditions of shape these women’s health of in the development stages of interventions instead of a post hoc consideration that aims to “tailor” programming created based on the experiences of dominant groups.

Critical frameworks for health equity that challenge assumptions of privilege, power, and their implications for health should be prioritized in program development and implementation alongside traditional social cognitive health behavior theories that may not adequately consider or address the social realities of marginalized groups (Ford and Airhihenbuwa 2011). Such perspectives provide the tools for intersectional and ecological approaches that center Black women's lived experiences and health and attend to larger social processes that impact them. Moreover, measures to assess adherence to these approaches should be built into program evaluation to offer accountability to Black women.

The continued dominance of individualistic approaches to promote sexual health that rely on a neoliberal, rational actor remains limiting. Moreover, these efforts often take a deficient approach that places Black women's supposed poor sexual decision-making as primarily responsible for the health inequities we face. Individual-level interventions should take care to refute rather than reinforce negative views of Black women's sexuality and racialized gender stereotypes. As demonstrated in this dissertation, HBCU women are keen of risks that accompany sex discourse and are deeply impacted by pejorative meanings associated with Black sexuality in existing sexual health discourse.

Not only has the dominance of risk-based approaches contributed to hypervigilance as women worked to protect their social and sexual status, but it has also contributed to the problematization Black women's sexual pleasure and desire. Notably, while this project set out to explore sexual agency, pleasure and desire did not appear front and center in women's accounts of sex and dating. Instead, links between sexuality and risk were prominent. When the topics of pleasure and desire did come up, they were most often framed by potential dangers for women, denial of desire as a form of self-regulation, or prioritizing men's pleasure. As Patricia

Hill Collins wrote, “Systems of oppression often succeed because they control the ‘permission to desire,’” sexually and otherwise (2002:150). Oppression has rendered these facets inarticulable through the systematic denial of sexual subjectivity and the pathology of Black women’s sexuality. While prevention of adverse outcomes such as STIs and unintended pregnancy are important, sexual health goes beyond the absence of these illnesses and should emphasize well-being through sexual pleasure, agency, and intimacy. Therefore, health promotion that takes up expansive and imaginative notions of sexual health with these foci is urgent and a matter of social justice.

Women narratives’ reveal critical insights and skills that could serve as key assets for their sexual health. For example, Chapter 4 reflected women’s awareness of their needs, commitments to their sexual health, and willingness to adapt in response. Some women went as far as attempting a different sexual navigation strategy when they experienced unwanted outcomes to better accommodate their realities and protect themselves. Further, Chapter 5 further demonstrate women’s willingness and belief that they could positively impact their own health. Health promotion should rely on strength or asset-based approach that promote Black women’s sexual subjectivity, affirm their intrinsic value, and encourage them to identify and meet their own needs, which they demonstrated the capacities to do in my research (Chávez et al. 2008; Ware, Thorpe, and Tanner 2019). Public health practitioners must draw on Black feminist approaches that validate Black women’s experience and this knowledge informed their social locations. Beyond acknowledging these understandings and how race, class, and gender structures shape them, health promotion should prioritize empowerment and agency that also attends to ways in which power operates outside of the individual (Collins 2002).

Additionally, community or institutional level interventions with a positive ecological perspective can combat the problematizations of Black women's sexuality to promote sexual health (Israel et al. 1998; Ware, Thorpe, and Tanner 2019). Public health efforts at HBCUs must leverage the assets offered by these institutional climates. One of the foremost strengths offered by HBCUs is a sense of belonging for many Black students whose identities and experiences had not been centered in other institutions or segments of society. The shared history of the college, its commitments to its core mission and values, and more broadly to the futures of Black Americans are significant and encourages investment in the strength and the sustainability of their communities (McMillan and Chavis 1986). Moreover, HBCUs' investments in the well-being of their students and Black communities more generally are tremendous. Practitioners should not underestimate these elements. Community-based participatory (CBPR) research offers one possibility for effective interventions that promote community ownership, direction, and involvement in the undertakings (Ross et al. 2010). Through CBPR, HBCUs have the authority to define and prioritize their needs. Additionally, as an important Black institution, HBCUs hold influence for sustainable efforts for broader social change and health equity in broader Black communities.

Public health practice is itself a localized form of power dynamics that must be addressed to fulfill the objectives of the field. Health equity is a complex enterprise and requires various perspectives, skill sets, and resources to accomplish effectively. Yet scholars and practitioners who are "outsiders" are believed to hold the knowledge and solutions. The pursuit of strengths-based approaches at individual, community, and institutional are particularly important for marginalized groups, whose intrinsic worth and expertise are not typically assessed as valuable by conventional academic communities. Further, through de-centering the "expert," credibility

would be lent to minoritized groups, centering their voices, allowing them to speak to their own experiences, and illuminating what might otherwise go unobserved yet is critical for effective health promotion. Additionally, insider researchers and practitioners must be critical of how internalized oppressions can influence their work and further fuel assumptions about Black women's sexuality and sexual health (Chávez et al. 2008). As Bowleg (2021) asserts, health equity researchers and practitioners of color must abandon conventional approaches to public health that harm rather than help the communities to which we belong, are invested in, and care about. This different set of tools must go beyond documenting inequity to illuminate and harness resistance, resilience, and hope in pursuit of social and health justice.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

My dissertation work represents a broader research trajectory that engages the ways that Black Americans confront intersectional inequities while pursuing sex, romance, and sexual health. The current research utilizes one-time interviews with thirty heterosexual undergraduate women at an HBCU who engaged in sexual intercourse with men in the past year. These women are a traditional college population so far as they are all unmarried, childless, and transitioned immediately from high school. Thus, they likely represent the core of peer culture at their institution. However, this project notably does not include queer women or women who identify as heterosexual but were celibate. In this way, the current study does not capture HBCU women's negotiations of sexuality apart from sexual involvement with men. A more comprehensive study would necessarily include women across these dimensions to better assess how the campus landscape shapes HBCU women's collegiate sexual experiences and sexual health. For example, queer HBCU women's marginalization will likely be intensified by homophobic and heterosexist politics promoted by their institutions and positioned as requisite

for elite status attainment and racial advancement. Further, heterosexual women may move to be celibate to adhere to racialized gender expectations, as a means of enacting sexual agency, or because of limited romantic and sexual opportunities. Future work could examine HBCU women's sexual experiences longitudinally, for example, beginning their first year and for a period following graduation. This would offer more precise assessments of how women's understandings and negotiations of sexuality may shift throughout enrollment and as a result of specific experiences. Additionally, the implications for their future sexual and romantic trajectories could be measured.

Immediate future directions expand my current line of research beyond HBCU women's individual-level experiences of campus sexual landscapes to further investigate their underpinnings. During interviews, women mentioned university sexual health promotion practices and how they contribute to creating, maintaining, or reshaping racialized, gendered, and classed repertoires for women's navigations of the sexual landscape. Chapter 3 revealed how for some women, the impetus to avoid racial stigma intrinsic to HBCUs shaped understandings of sexual risk and provided a safety net that allowed them to do Black ladyhood through eliminating the need for negotiating sexual norms such as monogamy or condom use. Other women drew on skills and perspectives learned from university sexual health programming that emphasized sexual risks for young Black women, compelling them to attempt agency. Still, most striking in these data is the sense of vulnerability and magnitude of responsibility women expressed for sex, dating, and sexual health outcomes. Altogether, these interviews provided glimpses of the universities' sexual health promotion that warrant foregrounding investigations of these practices.

While much attention has been given to the role of sexual socialization prior to college and how peers and party cultures shape campus sexual landscapes, less is known about the role of administrative actors in curating sexual standards and meaning for students. This project will investigate how sexual curricula—what HBCU students are taught, implicitly and explicitly, about sex and sexual health—deploy racialized meanings of sexuality, gender, and class through a focus on institutional policy and practice. I assert that through these processes, HBCUs facilitate the racialization of students' sexualities and inform meanings about gender and class power. The proposed work will critically examine college sexual health promotion and the wider constructed campus environment to investigate the messages HBCUs provide about sexual health, race, gender, and class. Further, I will investigate university administration, faculty, and staff as key socializing agents that inform sexuality.

The proposed research consists of two concurrent stages of qualitative data collection. First, I will conduct semi-structured interviews with target staff, faculty, and administrators across the field sites, including deans of students, Title IX team members, directors of university health services, housing directors, residential staff, and advisors and student leaders for on-campus health promotion organizations. Periodically, I will return to administration and staff for further insight into ethnographic observations and policies and literature produced by their offices, in the form of short interviews during data collection. Second, to gain broader assessments of how race, gender, and class ideology may be deployed in campus-specific policy and sexual health practice, I will conduct ethnographic observation of campus programming. Observations will be informed by data from interviews with HBCU women used in my dissertation work and ongoing interviews with university administration and staff. For focused observations, I will concentrate on events organized by student health services, Title IX offices,

housing and residential life, and deans of students advertised to explore dating, sex, and/or sexual health. I will also observe new student orientations as students gain a thorough introduction to campus culture through carefully curated programming and rituals.

HBCUs are often considered sanctuaries for Black students pursuing a college degree. They provide a sense of belonging for many young people whose identities and experiences are not centered in other institutions or segments of society because of their racial status; an HBCU is essentially a “different world.” These institutions began as sites of resistance, change, and empowerment. Yet as my dissertation findings suggest, the marginalization of Black women on these campuses shows that they are currently incongruent with this aspect of their founding. Still, there is great potential for HBCUs to be and become transformative spaces within which to reimagine the rules of Black gender, sexuality, and sexual health and to allow Black people to live their authentic selves. The undercurrents of conservatism, racial uplift, and respectability must be challenged for the sake of fostering safe havens for *all* Black students and in an effort to realize HBCUs’ potential as incubators of positive social change and justice.

Students have been at the forefront of challenging exclusionary practices and must be situated as leaders of change at their institutions. This research will be used in collaboration with HBCUs to aid in the facilitation of efforts for equity on campus. I aim to organize and collaborate with a student-action council to prioritize and address the communities’ needs from a socioecological perspective. With a broad change goal of improving sexual health among undergraduates, the proceeding projects will engage social, cultural, and institutional factors that contribute to sexual health inequities experienced by Black collegians at HBCUs. Strategies for action will be informed and led by the student body.

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TABLES

Table 1: Relationship Status at Time of Interview

Pseudonym	Classification	Major	Class Background⁹	Relationship Status
Aaliyah	Junior	Political Science	Middle/Upper-class	Single/on again-off again relationship
Alicia	First-year	English	Low-income/Working-class	Single/on a break
Ashley	First-year	Psychology	Low-income/Working-class	Single
Asia	Sophomore	Psychology	Middle/Upper-class	Monogamous, committed relationship
Brianna	Senior	Psychology	Middle/Upper-class	Monogamous, committed relationship
Brittany	Senior	Economics	Middle/Upper-class	Single
Candice	First-year	Biology, Pre-Medical track	Undetermined	Talking, Situationship
Chantelle	First-year	International Studies	Undetermined	Single
Courtney	Senior	Political Science	Middle/Upper-class	Talking, Situationship
Danielle	First-year	Biology, Pre-Medical track	Low-income/Working class	Single
Destiny	Senior	Psychology	Undetermined	Talking, Situationship
Dominique	First-year	Psychology, Pre-Medical track	Undetermined	Single
Erica	First-year	Biology, Pre-Medical track	Middle/Upper-class	Monogamous, committed relationship
Gabrielle	First-year	Environmental Science/Studies	Low-income/Working-class	Single
Jasmine	First-year	Political Science, Pre-law track	Middle/Upper-class	Monogamous, committed relationship
Jocelyn	Sophomore	Economics	Middle/Upper-class	Talking, Situationship
Kayla	Junior	Engineering	Middle/Upper-class	Talking, Situationship
Kelsey	Junior	Drama/Theatre	Middle/Upper-class	Monogamous, committed relationship
Kennedy	Sophomore	Sociology	Middle/Upper-class	Monogamous, committed relationship
Kiara	Senior	Political Science	Low-income/Working-class	Single
Mariah	Junior	Women's Studies	Middle/Upper-class	Monogamous, committed relationship
Maya	Sophomore	Chemistry	Middle/Upper-class	Talking, Situationship
Monica	First-year	Undeclared, Pre-medical track	Middle/Upper-class	Monogamous, committed relationship
Naomi	Junior	Pre-law track	Undetermined	Single/on a break
Raven	Senior	Biology, Pre-medical track	Middle/Upper-class	Talking, Situationship
Shawna	Senior	Sociology	Middle/Upper-class	Talking, Situationship
Sierra	Junior	Economics	Middle/Upper-class	Monogamous, committed relationship
Simone	Sophomore	Undeclared, Pre-medical track	Middle/Upper-class	Talking, Situationship
Tia	Junior	Economics	Undetermined	Single
Tiffany	Sophomore	Engineering	Middle/Upper-class	Non-monogamous relationship

⁹ Class background was determined based on parents' education and/or occupation.

Table 2: Sexual Navigation Strategies

Pseudonym	Classification	Class Background¹⁰	Context of Most Recent Sexual Involvement	Strategies Used¹¹
Aaliyah	Junior	Middle/Upper-class	Monogamous, committed relationship	P2P
Alicia	First-year	Low-income/Working-class	Monogamous, committed relationship	CTS
Ashley	First-year	Low-income/Working-class	Monogamous, committed relationship	OO
Asia	Sophomore	Middle/Upper-class	Monogamous, committed relationship	P2P
Brianna	Senior	Middle/Upper-class	Monogamous, committed relationship	OO
Brittany	Senior	Middle/Upper-class	Monogamous, committed relationship	OO
Candice	First-year	Undetermined	Continuous non-committed sexual & romantic involvement	OO
Chantelle	First-year	Undetermined	Monogamous, committed relationship	OO
Courtney	Senior	Middle/Upper-class	Continuous non-committed sexual & romantic involvement	P2P, OO
Danielle	First-year	Low-income/Working-class	Continuous non-committed sexual & romantic involvement	CTS, P2P
Destiny	Senior	Undetermined	Continued romantic & sexual involvement with ex post-breakup	OO
Dominique	First-year	Undetermined	Casual hookup	OO
Erica	First-year	Middle/Upper-class	Monogamous, committed relationship	OO
Gabrielle	First-year	Low-income/Working-class	Casual hookup	OO
Jasmine	First-year	Middle/Upper-class	Monogamous, committed relationship	P2P
Jocelyn	Sophomore	Middle/Upper-class	Continued sexual & romantic involvement with ex post-breakup	CTS, P2P
Kayla	Junior	Middle/Upper-class	Continuous non-committed sexual & romantic involvement	OO
Kelsey	Junior	Middle/Upper-class	Monogamous, committed relationship	OO
Kennedy	Sophomore	Middle/Upper-class	Monogamous, committed relationship	CTS, P2P
Kiara	Senior	Low-income/Working-class	Continued sexual & romantic involvement with ex post-breakup	CTS, P2P
Mariah	Junior	Middle/Upper-class	Monogamous, committed relationship	P2P, OO
Maya	Sophomore	Middle/Upper-class	Continuous non-committed sexual & romantic involvement	P2P
Monica	First-year	Middle/Upper-class	Monogamous, committed relationship	CTS, P2P
Naomi	Junior	Undetermined	Continued sexual & romantic involvement with ex post-breakup	OO
Raven	Senior	Middle/Upper-class	Continuous non-committed sexual & romantic involvement	OO
Shawna	Senior	Middle/Upper-class	Continued sexual & romantic involvement with ex post-breakup	CTS, P2P
Sierra	Junior	Middle/Upper-class	Monogamous, committed relationship	CTS
Simone	Sophomore	Middle/Upper-class	Continuous non-committed sexual & romantic involvement	P2P, OO
Tia	Junior	Undetermined	Continuous non-committed sexual & romantic involvement	P2P, OO
Tiffany	Sophomore	Middle/Upper-class	Non-monogamous romantic relationship	OO

¹⁰ Class background was determined based on parents' education and/or occupation.

¹¹ Key: CTS—Calling the Shots; OO—Opting Out; P2P—Playing to Play

Table 3: Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	Classification	Major	Class Background¹²	Region of Origin
Aaliyah	Junior	Political Science	Middle/Upper-class	South
Alicia	First-year	English	Low-income/Working-class	South
Ashley	First-year	Psychology	Low-income/Working-class	Northeast/East
Asia	Sophomore	Psychology	Middle/Upper-class	Northeast/East
Brianna	Senior	Psychology	Middle/Upper-class	South
Brittany	Senior	Economics	Middle/Upper-class	West
Candice	First-year	Biology, Pre-Medical track	Undetermined	South
Chantelle	First-year	International Studies	Undetermined	Northeast/East
Courtney	Senior	Political Science	Middle/Upper-class	Midwest
Danielle	First-year	Biology, Pre-Medical track	Low-income/Working class	Midwest
Destiny	Senior	Psychology	Undetermined	South
Dominique	First-year	Psychology, Pre-Medical track	Undetermined	South
Erica	First-year	Biology, Pre-Medical track	Middle/Upper-class	West
Gabrielle	First-year	Environmental Science/Studies	Low-income/Working Class	South
Jasmine	First-year	Political Science, Pre-law track	Middle/Upper-class	South
Jocelyn	Sophomore	Economics	Middle/Upper-class	South
Kayla	Junior	Engineering	Middle/Upper-class	South
Kelsey	Junior	Drama/Theatre	Middle/Upper-class	South
Kennedy	Sophomore	Sociology	Middle/Upper-class	West
Kiara	Senior	Political Science	Low-income/Working class	South
Mariah	Junior	Women's Studies	Middle/Upper-Class	Northeast/East
Maya	Sophomore	Chemistry	Middle/Upper-Class	Northeast/East
Monica	First-year	Undeclared, Pre-medical track	Middle/Upper-class	South
Naomi	Junior	Pre-law track	Undetermined	South
Raven	Senior	Biology, Pre-medical track	Middle/Upper-class	South
Shawna	Senior	Sociology	Middle/Upper-class	Northeast/East
Sierra	Junior	Economics	Middle/Upper-class	Northeast/East
Simone	Sophomore	Undeclared, Pre-medical track	Middle/Upper-Class	Southwest
Tia	Junior	Economics	Undetermined	Southwest
Tiffany	Sophomore	Engineering	Middle/Upper-Class	Midwest

¹² Class background was determined based on parents' education and/or occupation.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Email

Hello,

My name is Mercedesz Dunn. I am a Spelman alumna (C'2013) and a doctoral student in the department of sociology at the University of Michigan.

I am writing to invite you to participate in a research project, Perceptions of Eligible Black Men, Imbalanced Gender Ratios, and HIV Risk Behaviors Among Black Women at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (IRB#: HUM0009131 and 503FCE). This project has been approved by the IRB at the University of Michigan and the IRB at Hillman College.

The goal of this study is to better understand how black women at HBCUs think about and deal with dating, sexual interactions, and sexual health.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to fill out a brief online questionnaire that will take less than five minutes to complete. I will then contact you to schedule an interview over the phone or videoconference on a date and time that is convenient for you. The interview will be completely confidential and should last about forty-five minutes to an hour.

I understand how valuable your time is as a college student. As a token of my appreciation, you will be compensated with a \$20 Visa e-gift card for your participation.

You are eligible to participate if:

- 1.) You are currently enrolled as an undergraduate at Hillman College,
- 2.) You consider yourself to be Black or African-American,
- 3.) You consider yourself straight or heterosexual,
- 4.) You are a woman between 18 and 24 years old.

If you are interested in participating, please respond to mddunn@umich.edu or [redacted phone number]. If you have any questions about the study or would like more information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,
Mercedesz D. Dunn

Doctoral Student, Department of Sociology
MPH Candidate, Department of Health Behavior & Health Education

Appendix B: Interview Guide

Introduction

Thanks so much for taking the time to speak with me today. As you know, with this study, I am trying to better understand how black women think about and deal with sexual situations and their sexual health. Remember, there are no right or wrong answers. I just want to hear your thoughts and experiences. I want this to feel like a conversation. Some of the questions are quite personal so if you feel uncomfortable or don't want to answer a question, let me know and I will skip it. If you have any questions or need me to clarify anything, feel free to ask me at any time. Do you have any questions/concerns at this time?

Okay. Let's get started. So, let's start by you telling me a little bit about yourself.

- Where are you from?
- How old are you?
- What year are you?
- What are two reasons that you choose to come to Spelman?
- Can you tell me a little about what dating in the AUC is like?
 - Do you only date in the AUC? Have you dated guys from other schools or local guys?
 - How would you describe the ratio, the number women compared to men, in the AUC?
 - What would you say it is?
 - Does this sex ratio impact on your attitudes towards relationships?
 - In what ways?
 - (If no) Why doesn't it matter for you? Why not?

I want to talk about the idea of eligible black men.

Perceptions of “Eligible” Black Men

- What, from your perspective, is an “eligible” black man?
 - *Where do you think these ideas come from?*
 - *Probe if they don't talk about themselves.*
- Some people say that there is a small pool of eligible black men; some people say that that is an exaggeration. Could you tell me a bit about your feelings regarding the availability of “eligible” black men?
 - Do you believe there are a limited number of “eligible” black men?
 - Why/why not?

- Do you think this is the case in the AUC?
 - Why/why not?
 - *Probe about competitiveness, what makes guys in AUC not “eligible?”*

Now that we have discussed dating in the AUC and your perception of eligible black men, I want to ask a little bit more about your dating life and relationships.

Relationships/Relationship Desires

- What are you looking for now, in terms of dating?
 - What about more long term?
 - *Do you want to get married?*
 - *Do you see yourself getting married?*
 - *Why/why not?*
- Are you involved with someone now?
 - ***If no:*** When was your last relationship?
 - Can you tell me a little about it?
 - How did it end?
 - Do you want to be in a relationship?
 - Why/why not?
 - ***If yes:*** Can you tell me a little it?
 - How did you meet?
 - Describe this relationship.
 - How long have you been together?
 - Tell me a little about your partner.
 - 2 Favorite things about him.
- Could you tell about your most recent sexual partner?
 - Was it this person?
 - How long have you been having sex? At what point in the relationship did you start having sex?

For the following questions, remind participant to respond to these as they relate to their current relationship or most recent sexual encounter (have those not in a relationship tell you about their relationship to their last sexual partner).

- Did you and your (current/most recent) partner discuss any ground rules before having sex?
 - What were they?
 - Did you discuss ground rules at any other point when you were involved? When?
 - Was there a particular situation that led to this conversation?
 - What were these conversations like? Could you walk me through one of them (*probe for first one*)
 - What was discussed? (*timing, condom use, contraception, acts*)
 - Are these rules usually followed?

- Why/why not?
- How about your partner?
- Can you tell me about a particular instance when they weren't followed?
 - What happened?
- Have you had conversations with your partner about condom use?
- Did you discuss sexual history with your partner? *Probe if she does not specify that both histories*
 - What was discussed? (*number of partners, testing history*)
- Do you feel that these conversations impact your sexual relationship with your partner in any way?
 - How so?
 - Probe about impact ground rules and sexual history if they don't address both.

Perceived Control in Sexual Situations

- Generally, in your relationship, who do you think has the most say in sexual situations? You? Your Partner?
 - How so?
 - Could you tell me about your most recent sexual encounter?
 - Who do you feel had more say in that instance?
 - Why do you think this was the case/ how could you tell?
- How much say do you feel that you have in sexual situations?
 - Are there things you feel that have control over?
 - Could you tell me about an instance when this happened?
 - *Are there strategies or ways to make sure you get your way?*
 - Are there things you feel that you do not have control over?
 - Could you tell me about an instance when you experienced this?
 - Are there times when you find yourself going along with things/ something that you didn't necessarily want to do?
 - What do you give up control over?
 - Why?
 - Has there ever been an instance when you felt like you did not have control?
 - Can you tell me more about that?
 - Why do you feel that you did not have control?
 - Have there ever been situations relating to sex that you and your partner disagreed on?
 - Walk me through that encounter. What did you disagree on? What happened?
 - How was it resolved?

Perceived Control over Condom Use

- How is it usually decided whether or not a condom is used during sex?
 - Why do you believe this to be the case?
 - To what extent do you think this changes in different circumstances (ie. in oral vs. vaginal sex, duration of relationship)?
 - If varies
 - Can you give me a situation when you felt you had control?
 - Are there strategies you use to make sure your partner uses a condom?
 - Can you give me a situation when you felt you didn't have a say?
 - In your most recent sexual encounter, did you use a condom?
 - During what acts?
 - Who initiated condom use?
 - If she initiated --What were your partner's reactions?
 - Do you feel that his reactions affected how you felt about using a condom in that instance? In the future?
- If condom was not used
- Why wasn't a condom used?
 - How did you feel about not using one?
- Do you and your partner ever disagree about condom use?
 - What happens when you disagree?
 - How is this resolved?
 - Who usually gets their way?

We've talked about some of the sexual experiences. Now I want to talk a little about sexual health.

Perceptions of Risk

- How can/could you determine if a partner is "safe" to have sex with?
 - Can you tell me a little about what you define as safe?
 - Do you feel that your current (or most recent) partner is safe?
 - Why/ why not?
- *Who would you say is at risk for contracting HIV on campus?*
 - *Why do you say this? What makes you say this?*
- *How likely do you think you are to contract HIV during oral sex?*
 - *During intercourse?*
 - *Why do you think you are at such little/much risk?*
 - *Can you tell me why you believe this to be so?*
 - *What do you think could put you at higher risk?*
 - *What about for other STIs?*
 - *Have you been tested for STIs?*
 - *Which ones?*
 - *When? Before you began having sex with your current/most recent partner?*

- *What about your partner?*
- *Did he tell you this prior to your first sexual encounter?*

If the participant does not mention pregnancy throughout the interview

So we've talked about STIs a bit, but I just wanted to ask about pregnancy.

- Are you concerned about getting pregnant right now?
 - Why/Why not?
- Are you using contraceptives to prevent pregnancy?
 - What are you using?
 - If not using condom...
 - How long have you been using this?
 - Does your partner know?
 - Was he involved in your decision to use this month?
 - Tell me more about that.

We've come to the end of my questions, so I just want to ask you a question to wrap up.

What's one piece of advice you would give you about dating/sex to a freshman coming to the AUC next year?

Those are all of the questions that I have for you. Is there anything that you want to add or elaborate on? Thank you so much for speaking with me.