THE MYTH OF BLACK SEXUAL SUPERIORITY: A RE-EXAMINATION

by Robert Staples

Over ten years ago this writer raised the question: Are blacks sexually superior? My answer at that time was "if sexual superiority means to enjoy the pleasures of sexual congress without feelings of guilt and fear, freed from the restraints of white puritanism, the answer must be in the affirmative."1 In the intervening decade, there has been a dramatic increase in the frequency with which most white Americans engage in various sexual activities and in the number of persons who include formerly rare or forbidden techniques in their sexual repertoires.2 These changes have given rise to the need to re-examine the question of black sexual superiority in light of what is regarded as the white sexual revolution.

A review of the past record of white beliefs about black sexuality casts in bold relief the view that "for the majority of white men, the Negro represents the sexual instinct (in its raw state)."3 As long ago as the sixteenth century Englishmen were imputing to Africans an unrestrained lustfulness and describing them as "large" propagators and "hot constitution'd ladies." Certainly, in comparison to European dictums about chastity being the best state for men and their norms that women should not enjoy sex under any circumstances, Africans represented the sexuality of beasts and the bestiality of sex.4 History, however, tells us that Europeans were not always a puritanical culture.5 Some claim that the beginning of human society (i.e., white society) was characterized by unrestrained sexual relations between man and woman, father and daughter, mother and son. Only with the development of private property, when men needed proof of paternity in order to will their resources to the right heir, was sexual exclusivity for women only, brought into existence and mostly among the propertied classes.6

Within the African continent, at least South of the Sahara, their view, in general, of sex was directed toward both physiological and psychological adjustment. Tribal values on sexual behavior were strongly woven into their social structure and the first instinctive manifestations of sexuality were conditioned by their mores and environment. Public rituals often existed to confirm the appropriate sexual elements and remove the improper ones. Whereas Europeans saw sex as inherently sinful, the African ethos was that breaches of Tribal sexual law are offenses against individuals and social groups, not against God. The African was concerned with crime and not with Sin. Conversely, it is impossible to generalize
about African sexual permissiveness since there were large numbers of them who imposed harsh penalties on women who did not enter the conjugal state as virgins as well as many who allowed youth to satisfy sexual desires before marriage.\(^7\)

It was with these diverse sexual values that Africans were brought to this country as slaves. There is sufficient evidence in the form of slave narratives, the slaveholders’ own records and the considerably lighter hue of Afro-Americans, that those Tribal norms were contravened on a massive scale, whenever possible and by bondsmen, overseer and slavemaster alike. However, within the slave quarters there were boundaries imposed on sexual activity among its inhabitants. A relationship between one man and a woman was respected and whenever possible they confined their sexual relationships to each other.\(^8\)

After slavery ended Afro-Americans probably did have a more permissive sexual code than many Euro-Americans, but that fact has to be placed in the proper historical context. In accordance with Freudian theory, we can assume that the sexual drive exists in all individuals and has to be expressed in some form.\(^9\) Historically, males in this culture have been allowed unrestrained libidinal expression. It is women on which the greatest restraints have been placed and bourgeois women at that. Even among working class white women the norm of chastity has been honored more in the breach than in its observance. A major reason for the class difference is the greater use of economic resources by the bourgeois male to exact sexual chastity from the women in his class. Where there is no exchange value of sex for material reward, the libido thrives in a more liberated way.\(^10\)

Thus, because the black masses enjoyed a more healthy sexual equality than was possible for whites in the post-bellum era, a more permissive sexual code developed. Moreover, some of the controls on Euro-American sexuality did not exist in the same degree among Afro-Americans. The puritanical exhortations of organized religion served to effectively check much of the Euro-American’s sexuality while the black church functioned more as a tension-reducing institution and eschewed monitoring the moral standards of its parishioners. Black males did not classify women into bad and good groups on that basis of their virginal status. White men did make these distinctions and women were eligible for the respectability of marriage according to their classification in one group or the other. During an epoch in which the majority of white women were economically dependent on their men this was an effective censor of their sexuality. Black women, in the main, were more economically and psychologically independent.\(^11\)

One sees the operant effect of class as a differentiator of sexual expression by looking at variations in the black community itself. While the black bourgeoisie has, until recently, represented only a small segment of the total black community, its sexual values and behavior were often a reflection of the white bourgeoisie. Fairly conservative sexual attitudes were typical of middle-class blacks as were premarital chastity and female frigidity. Many bourgeois Afro-American males preferred that their wives stay at home rather than work. Frazier once observed that “there is much irregularity in this class. The importance of sex to this class is indicated by their extreme sensitivity to any charge that Negroes are more free or more easy in their sexual behavior than whites.”\(^12\) In its most extreme manifestation their sexual conservatism was reflected in the en-loco-parentis stance of black colleges. In the 1920s Fisk University had printed regulations that “it was forbidden for two students of the
opposite sex to meet each other without the presence and permission of the Dean of Women or of a teacher." A girl and boy could be sent home for walking together in broad daylight.\textsuperscript{13}

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This is not to say that there were no moral parameters among the black working class nor that all of their sexual values and behavior are healthy. In particular, we have to re-examine the stereotype of black sexual superiority as it relates to fulfilling the needs of both men and women. Furthermore, sexual competency must be defined as more than the physical fusion of bodies and consummation of the act of intercourse. We must also consider the psychological properties of the sex act, its misuse by both participants and how open blacks are to its total dimension as well as alternative sexual life styles. In part, this re-examination is forced by the new realities facing the black community and our increasing awareness that any sexual act that is biologically possible may have a socially redeeming value.

No matter how positive the eventual outcome of black working class sexual socialization, the process by which they acquire their sexual values leaves much to be desired. From the limited data on the subject, it is apparent that black parents are not the source of sex education for most black youth. The majority of them, in fact, receive their initial knowledge of sex from peers and other sources. And, much of that information is fragmented and inaccurate.\textsuperscript{14} While it is often assumed that blacks are much earlier exposed to sex than whites, the Kinsey group found that whites tend to learn about menstruation, fertilization, pregnancy, abortion, and condoms at slightly younger ages than blacks. Furthermore, white males experienced their first ejaculation from any source earlier than black males and among females the black woman reported experiencing less nudity in their childhood homes than their white counterpart.\textsuperscript{15}

More important than the age at which they acquire their sexual education is what many young black men learn. To wit, it is a well formulated system for manipulating and controlling women. Early in the life cycle they realize that money and women are the two most highly valued objects that one can gain in our system. As Hammond reports, women can supply one with money or what it can buy as well as a means of satisfying his sexual desires. Hence, a competitive system emerges among men to make as many sexual conquests as possible. It is a dog-eat-dog system whereby the man with the best rap, clothes or style wins—women as the spoils.

\textsuperscript{16} Lost in this struggle for one-upsmanship is a feeling of relatedness toward women and an articulated awareness of their human qualities.

\textit{Almost the most blatant indicator of the woman qua property ideology among many black men is the violence that often accompanies the sexual conquest. Witness, for instance, the common and legendary practice of “taking pussy.” The strongarming of black women into sexual submission is pervasive in the sexual histories collected by this writer, and it is not a practice confined to working-class blacks but equally represented among the bourgeoisie. While white men have always been able to use their superior economic resources to compel sexual submission from white women, there is increasing evidence that black men are not reluctant to use the perquisites of high office or wealth to accomplish the same end.\textsuperscript{17} Small wonder, then, that the black...}
women in Johnson's college sample reported more negative feelings on the day following their first premarital sexual experience from their white counterparts.18

Although we recognize that much of blacks' sexual behavior is a function of forces beyond their control (i.e., white racism and internal colonialism) there must be some accountability for these individual actions. In every study comparing black and white sexuality, the greatest conflict between values and feelings exists among sex roles—not racial groups. Black and white men are much more united in the meaning of sex than are black men and black women. Men of both races are similar in the very selfish peer-oriented nature of their sexual behavior. If this

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self-indulgent pattern should continue we might take heed of this warning from the National Black Feminist Alliance that: "we must, together, as a people, work to eliminate racism from without the black community which is trying to destroy us as an entire people but we must remember that sexism is destroying and crippling us from within."19

Of course, the misuse of sex is not confined to men. In this capitalistic society sex is frequently part of a profit and loss system rather than the genuine sharing of mind and bodies. There is no dearth of black women who have used sex as a punishment, a tease, or as currency. While much of male sexual jealousy is unwarranted and reflects their view of women as property, women aid in the development of this destructive emotion by the cunning ploy of keeping a partner wondering whether there is any infidelity or not. The emerging practice of women enjoying male companionship with men who are labelled as "friends" has done nothing to arrest male tendencies toward sexual jealousy.

However, the lion's share of the burden for our sex role conflict must be placed upon black males. While some black women give as much as they get, the system inherently favors men. With an effective sex ratio of three black women to every male, the females have little, if any, bargaining power, where men have such a larger number of women from which to choose.20 In a sense, black women often find themselves in the position of sexually auditioning for a meaningful relationship. After a number of tryouts, they may find a black male who is willing to make a commitment to them.

We should not be deluded, the sexual revolution and its rhetoric notwithstanding, into believing that black women have been able to totally separate sex from love and commitment. The contemporary rhetoric of black female sexual liberation we hear may be best explained by their need for avoiding cognitive dissonance. When there is an incompatibility between an act and a belief system, the individual must reduce the dissonance by altering her behavior or beliefs. Consequently, black women who, of necessity, are sexually active develop liberal views about their sexuality. But, this psychological compartmentalization has its limitations. Within their liberal sexual activity most black women are bargaining for a stable relationship. And, they are doing so with a group that is very low on commitment as a priority in their scheme of things.

The onset of liberated black female sexuality would have been a godsend had black men attempted to understand the nature of female sexuality. Once the gates were open to the female orifice, the legacy of the past took hold as the man's response. Lovemaking was conceptualized as a physical act with male satisfaction as
its ultimate end. Hence, we find black women decrying the fact that tenderness, communication, and emotion is not attendant to the act of sexual intercourse. Too often the male never reveals his naked emotions to his partner because he views such an act as a sign of weakness. When tenderness or affection is expressed, women complain, it is only in the context of a prelude to sexual activity.

Many black women have come to find that the sexual revolution wasn’t their war. Obviously, the strict double standard no longer exists but it has been supplanted by more arbitrary male standards about how sexually liberated women can be. A woman who proclaims “extreme” sexual liberation still finds herself ranked as less than desirable for the position of wife or even stable companion. In a recent study of male sexuality, a pair of researchers found that many young men still adhere to the old traditional values. A large number of them wanted their wives to be virgins. While those were white men, Johnson found in her study of black males that they were more likely to have a double standard than the white males in the same sample. This could, of course, mean that black men do not want a woman who is as sexually active as they. It still presages that the sexually liberated black women may not be among the chosen.

Even black women who accept this handicap often find less than fulfillment in their sexual efforts. Lack of tender foreplay and other insensitivities is an oft-expressed grievance. Failure to achieve orgasm is frequently attributed to his refusal to use any technique other than penile penetration and thrusts. Although clitoral stimulation or oral manipulation may be necessary to help her achieve orgasm, many black men have strong taboo against such practices. In one of the few studies on the subject, Hunt found only 35 percent of single black males vs. 72 percent of white males had participated in cunnilingus in the last year. Moreover, 48 percent of single black women had engaged in fellatio—indicating that many black men believe it is better to receive than give.

The aforementioned turn of events would have less import if not for the changing realities of the black community. As of 1976, the majority of black women between the ages of 20-45 are not married and living with a spouse. Reasons for this unprecedented situation range from the serious shortage of black males to the increasing disenchantment with marriage as an institution. Whatever the reason, it is clear that this situation requires some rethinking of old values and practices. Many black women will acquire extensive sexual experience because they realize it is impractical to wait for the elusive goal of marriage. The changing definition of sex roles will also impact on the sexual assertiveness of women and the expectations of male sexual performance. Black will have to be open to the variety of sexual expressions if their needs are to be filled in the context at the new black reality.

Whereas moral boundaries will have to be expanded to accommodate the new reality, some parameters must be maintained in order to preserve the Black Family. One of them may be an off-limits rule on those blacks that are currently married. Currently, it has become fashionable for sexually liberated black women to include married men as sexual partners. Such extra-marital relationships might be acceptable if they remained merely physical relationships but they run the constant
danger of becoming emotional ones and serve to disrupt existing marriages. In 1975, 26.6 percent of the black population between the ages of 25 and 54 were divorced compared to only 8.4 of similar whites.\textsuperscript{25} Some of this statistical racial disparity may be attributed to the pressure exerted by single black women entangled with married men. The same parameters should be applied to married women but they are generally less accessible, and for different reasons, than male spouses.

The continuing shortage of black men will still pose a dilemma for many black women. A common suggestion made mostly by men, is that they should be willing to share their men (i.e., polygamy).\textsuperscript{26} Such multiple relationships could be viable if men were also willing to share and if women who had internalized values of monogamy could accept such an arrangement. In most cases they can not, especially when the sharing must be acknowledged and agreed upon. The de facto sharing that now exists has been responsible for its share of heartbreaks, jealousy, violence, and mental anguish.

It is incumbent upon us to leave as open as possible the options available to black women. One of them may be interracial relationships if they find a suitable partner and can withstand the stresses inherent in such an arrangement. Another is homosexuality. While the black community has never been as harshly repressive of the black homosexual as in white society, there has never been full acceptance either. Those who are willing to accept any of the above options should be aware of the pitfalls contained in them. White males, for instance, represent no improvement over black males, but their numbers are larger and college-educated black women will be able to find a mate of equal status. At the same time, it means, in many cases, virtual isolation from family and friends. Moreover, the same conflicts that characterize black marriages will prevail along with the inexorable pressures exerted on such unions.\textsuperscript{27}

Living a gay lifestyle is still fraught with danger, especially for women who are already oppressed on the basis of gender. In the case of black women, it would be a triple minority status. Gay relationships are also rife with the problems that typify heterosexual unions. In many cases gays complain of being unable to find a meaningful relationship, of sexual jealousy, personality conflicts and the like. It is only by considering this as well as other possibilities that black women in the existentialist sense can find themselves as the subject, not the object of their social world.

Concomitant with the sexual revolution and the new reality, blacks must be accepting of the right of women to choose whether they wish to bear children or not. That means making available safe contraceptives and access to abortions on demand. Considering the unsafe nature of many female contraceptives, it also indicates greater male responsibility for birth control. The male virility cult must be abandoned for male willingness to use condoms or undergo a vasectomy after siring a reasonable number of children. Since some black women may be in the single state in perpetuity they may choose to adopt a child or have one out-of-wedlock. Such an alternative should be permissible within the expanded moral boundaries necessary to confront our new reality.

None of this critical analysis of black sexuality should be allowed to overshadow the positive aspects of their sexual life. In the main blacks continue to engage in and enjoy their sexual encounters. Part of the problem arises from the conflict of traditional values with new realities. And, for the bourgeoisie, they were not black...
values. This does not mean that the black sexual experience has been a bleak or negative one. For the most part sex has been the one haven they have had from the daily oppression of white racism. With all its intrusions, the internal colonial order did not enter their bedrooms.

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It is not the sexual revolution but the new black reality that commands our attention. For the first time in our history the majority of black women, and large numbers of men, are and will remain unmarried. Perforce, their sexuality must be harnessed in such a way as to promote the meeting of this universal human need. Sex should be used as a means of communicating, not as an instrument of domination and control. The time for game playing is over. Both men and women must cultivate modalities of healthy sexual expressions which will preserve their basic integrity and humanity. As for the question of black sexual superiority, we do not need the label of sexually superior any more than we have heretofore needed the appellation of mentally inferior. Above all, we need a sexual ethos that will contribute to our unity as a people and that value system must serve all of the black community.

Notes

22. Johnson, op. cit.
Three Years

(For Joan Jara)

1

Her children and time and more time are all she has left around her, now.

Copper clasps a shuddering economy; it doesn’t warm a wrenching heart.

Surely, she’s more than percentages, more than a safe trick for smelters?

2

And her cotton dress? Winter’s coming. She walks with her shoulders hunched.

The world of buy-and-sell grinds away; there’s hardly an open face, anywhere.

Profit slithers a crush of anacondas through all the dangling loopholes.

3

And yet, she keeps faith with hope, somewhere warm, somewhere underground.

Earth tremors usually topple statues; earthquakes tear apart whole designs.

She’s certain there’s more than copper hot in the hills were her dreams live.

by Andrew Salkey