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"When I was 11, my great aunt told me that when I start dating, make sure I date someone who is lighter than me, white, or Spanish. She said 'You want someone lighter than you so you can have pretty babies. You are already dark enough. Why would you want an ugly baby?'"- Stacy, senior, 21; born in the Dominican Republic, raised in The U.S. Virgin Islands

My conversation with Stacy took place in a reserved room in a campus library one afternoon. Her comments arose out of a series of questions I asked through an informal interview. Prior to the interview, I identified my position as a Black woman, student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and a researcher interested in her story and also how she understands her world to be affected (or not) by the low sex ratio (i.e. the number of men to women) that exists in the Black community (Adimora et al., 2013). Although I had a list of guiding questions, I informed Stacy my intention was to have an organic dialogue rather than go through a scripted series of questions. With Stacy, and with my other interviewees, I allowed the conversation to travel where she brought it and with this unrestrained method, we arrived at some interesting and unexpected awakening moments.

I opened with the disruption of Stacy's identity[1] as a Black woman to illustrate how she came to regard her skin color and consequently her self-identity. Colorism is defined as "the tendency to perceive or behave toward members of a racial category based on the lightness or darkness of their skin tone" (Maddox & Gray, 2002, p. 250). The introduction of this skin tone bias had a lasting influence on 11-year-old Stacy as it resulted in the initial rejection of herself and necessarily of her darker skinned, Black male counterparts. Stacy carried these notions of

[1] The word *identity* has many meanings. In this thesis, identity is a dynamic concept defined as the characteristics, beliefs, and experiences through which a person can express themselves—both as an individual and as part of a collective group. It is culturally constructed in that culture is the foundation on which an individual can make meaning out of their experiences and ultimately create an image that connects them with a group and separates them from another. Identity is not a single variable, but rather comprises multiple variables, affecting all aspects of experience.

Black bodies throughout her young adulthood actively working to reject them and ultimately embracing her identity as a Black woman. Stacy communicated that she had always gravitated towards dating men within her own race and insisted to her family that this was not something negative. She chose to spend her college years attending a primarily Black institution where she was able to reclaim and reaffirm her identity as a Black woman. She brought these topics into conversation with her peers and community in ways that showed her the power and beauty of her Blackness.

A note on nomenclature, that throughout this thesis, men and women are referred to as "Black." I want to explain my intentional decision to capitalize the "B," when referring to the people, race, and skin tone. I have noticed that scientific, technical, and academic literature consistently use a lowercase "b" when referring to the race of the people being studied. There is something very reductionist about this decision and it is rooted in an unpleasant history of how to categorize--otherize, if you will--Black people following their emancipation. The purpose of capitalizing the word is to mark its importance as a cultural-identifier and as a measure of respect for the history, identity, and integrity of the community.

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Historically, Black women have been portrayed in two very different ways when it comes to relationships with Black men. In media and in pop culture they are represented as "matriarchal, domineering and emasculating" (Newsome, Davis, & Dinac, 2015). Research on the cultural portrayals of Black women in media reveal dominating images of the Baby Mama, the whore/jezebel, and "the bitch" (Craig, 2006; Entman and Rojecki, 2000). Less publicized are the rates at which successful Black women are chronically single. In public health literature, Black women are depicted as relatively powerless. Although the widely-accepted impression is

that Black women are assertive, aggressive, and direct, public health literature constantly challenges this notion. Research suggests this stereotype may not be easily achieved in relationships as Black women are in a disadvantaged position due to the absence of Black men.

The literature reveals that Black women are aware of the low sex ratio and some had already accepted they did not have a chance of finding another partner (Bowleg et al., 2004). Consequently, they described tolerating their partner's undesirable and risky behaviors because they perceived they had no alternatives than to bear the likelihood "that their risky partners might infect them" with a sexually transmitted disease (Bowleg et al., 2004). Another study supported this, stating that "women's low self-esteem and their willingness to comply with men's request not to use condoms were associated with their desire to have a male partner at any cost" (Ferguson, Quinn, Eng & Sandelowski, 2006). This introduces dimensions of power and shows how the aspiration to be in a relationship can interfere with important decision-making surrounding condom-use and other behavior. In some cases, the sex ratio made it difficult for Black women to consistently engage in protective behaviors because their focus was on preserving their relationship and satisfying their partners' wishes (Noar, Webb, Van, Feist-Price, Crosby, Willoughby & Troutman, 2012).

Overall, Black women noted that the shortage of viable partners exacerbated sentiments of disempowerment. Women mentioned their willingness to settle for a man just to be with someone and described women they know whose lives were ruined by a "worthless man taking advantage of them" (Bontempi et al., 2008). They also explained how they ended up in desperate situations as their need to keep a man superseded their own health (Bontempi et al., 2008). While this thesis does not inquire about the past or present sexual history of interviewees, I want

readers to understand that there are precarious social environments in the Black community creating opportunities for poor health outcomes.

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This thesis extends my summer research that focused on the low male to female sex ratio in the Black community. Through ethnographic methods, I investigate the meaning and strategies that Black, young adult women develop to make sense of their dating opportunities and risks, define their goals and priorities, and cope with the structural and cultural vulnerabilities they face. Although my interviews did not explicitly or implicitly raise questions about individuals' sexual behavior and/or health, I intentionally position the discourses gleaned from my interviews in the broader public health framework of the summer research I conducted. I do this to show how individual and community health is implicated through the skewed sex ratio. My goal is to bring Black women's stories, lived experiences, and knowledge to public health leaders who may or may not understand these discourses but can thereafter use this knowledge to identify best places to intervene with targeted and culturally sensitive prevention efforts. My hope is for this research to add to the academic literature by revealing the importance of a holistic approach based in thick description, including life narratives, notions of kinship and selfhood, and class-related visions of the ideal life course.

In addition, my thesis seeks to understand the discourses that young, college-educated, Black women are using about partner selection and limited partner availability. I explore how Black women have been socialized to regard Black men and the toll that has had on their ability to find and sustain healthy relationships. The individual behaviors I refer to must be understood in regards within the context of the historical, social, and cultural worlds that surround them.[2]

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[2] I urge my readers not to misrecognize individual behavior as problems of culture or problems of poor choice. The individuals I reference both in the literature and in my interviews, have varied experiences, pressures, desires, and face often irresolvable

There are many different social and cultural realities shaping Black communities. The environments that I am referring to are the historical and contemporary legacies of Black families, the policing of Black bodies within and outside of their race, and the low number of Black men that continue to matriculate through institutions of higher education. I explore how these nuanced social and cultural environments may or may not be influencing individual and community health risks and outcomes. Through ethnography, I disentangle the nature of the discourses that women are having about these issues while assessing how they personally and collectively work to understand the structures they are up against. More than that, I reveal the humanity of Black women making meaningful lives amid these social forces.

Methods, Position, and Politics of Black Research

This thesis represents two phases of research--the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) summer phase and the North Carolina Central University (NCCU) phase. At the CDC, I was working for a researcher in the Division of HIV/AIDS Prevention. The research I did was impersonal as my days were spent at a desk reading an overwhelming amount of literature on how Blacks were at a disproportionate risk of HIV infection. The closest I arrived to the humanity of these affected individuals was through articles that had an interview and/or focus-group component. I mostly obtained objective knowledge that is available and commonly understood in the scientific community. While I do not dispute these statistics and what is going on, my current research captures what women have to say about the imbalance in sex ratios and how it is affecting their lives.

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contradictions between these. The ideological framework common in American thought that treats individual behavior as the outcome of rational calculations regarding a spectrum of clear and equally understandable choices does a disservice to them.

The NCCU phase was designed to learn how Black women select potential partners, envision ideal relationships, and gauge their knowledge of the imbalance in sex ratios. I asked a variety of questions beginning with how women were socialized to regard Black men to unravel how women's past experiences colored their ability to navigate and understand their social worlds. To answer these questions, I conducted semi-structured interviews with ten students attending NCCU who self-identified as Black, female, heterosexual, and interested in pursuing relationships with Black men through November 2017-January 2018. For women who were unable to meet in person, I held Skype interviews. Our conversations were audio recorded, and I took notes by computer for the duration of our conversation. All of the names used in this thesis are pseudonyms chosen by the participants themselves. The questions were designed to elicit in-depth, narrative accounts from Black women about how they select partners, and describe, understand, and respond to the limited partner availability of Black men. The same questions were asked across all participants. (See Appendix for the full list of guiding interview questions). Interviews were 45 minutes-1 hour long and were held in spaces that participants identified as private and safe. All interviews were transcribed verbatim to include pauses, comments, and reflections for context. The transcripts were entered into MAXQDA 2018 for analysis. I employed a version of show and tell by presenting statistics regarding the unusually low male to female sex ratio in the Black community and asked participants if this phenomenon was something that they saw and/or acknowledged to be true, or if this had in fact not been their experience. Based on their narratives, I argue that how women view their ability to secure a relationship is intimately tied to their health. The findings that I detail are not intended to be generalizable, instead, they are meant to provide a new dimension of texture to the existing literature.

NCCU was a unique site to take up this research because it is a public historically Black university. According to U.S. News & World Report, NCCU has a total undergraduate enrollment of 6,285 students with a gender distribution that is 66% women to 34% men (U.S. News & World Report, 2018). Their stories are especially powerful because they are positioned in a space where there is a collective of Black students thinking together about issues relevant to their community and lives. There was an intentional research benefit to working with this population sample and community. Even as a student of UNC-CH, I felt I had "insider" knowledge of the conversations that Black women have with each other. I believe my identity as a Black woman was useful to this research in that it helped participants feel comfortable sharing their stories and experiences. As a result, we arrived at some particularly fascinating conversations. Regarding the community, I do not have any ties to the NCCU campus and therefore, my role as an "outsider" of their community and its culture, was also an advantage as I was not linked to their social networks. Participants felt comfortable knowing that their identity and stories would remain private. Finally, I wanted to examine if the historically Black college and university (HBCU) environment was viewed as counter to or a direct representation of how Black women envision their future prospects and dating/marriage lives. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Institutional Review Board approved this study (#17-2621) and each student participating provided written and verbal informed consent.

I had a professional connection with participants, reinforced by a personal one. We are all college-educated Black women, who have to think about these issues in the moments that they occur, but also prospectively. The women I interviewed trusted we shared similar experiences regarding dating and interacting with Black men. In allowing me to tell their stories, they counted on me to have a common language through which to interpret and make-meaning of

their stories. Terms such as "talking" and "situationships" arose and there was an immediate understanding of the obscurity of this language that was captured non-verbally. Even after asking them to define these words, I was often met with fragmented assertions, but never a universal definition, confirming the ambiguity. There were moments during our individual conversations where it felt as though women were enlisting me and my experiences alongside their narratives. They occasionally prefaced their statements with "we," however, I could not always be certain if "we" referred to the two of us in that space, or if perhaps there was a larger "we" which included Black women who these women were representing. Later on in this thesis, I detail why there were very striking moments where I might not count myself in a declaration of "we."

I have personal investments in this research, primarily because I identify as a Black woman and have come in contact with many of the issues that the literature raises. The path that has brought me to think more anthropologically about the socio-cultural environments that frame Black heterosexual partnerships—and ultimately to writing this thesis—was through my summer internship at the CDC.

Health, Risk, and Black Women's Relationship Choices

Much of the funding for HIV prevention among Blacks has centered on the men who have sex with men (MSM) population, and thus heterosexual Blacks have not had as much success garnering support for prevention efforts geared to their demographic. I conducted research undertaking qualitative analysis of the sexual scripts shaping Black heterosexual partnerships and the associated risk of HIV infection for Black women. I studied the ways that cultural, sexual scripts guide Black women's decision making and behavior around intimate relationships. The term *sexual script* was coined by Gagnon and Simon in 1973 as a "process

that transforms the social actor from being exclusively an actor to being a partial scriptwriter or adapter shaping the materials of relevant cultural scenarios into scripts for behavior in particular contexts" (Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Simon & Gagnon, 1984, p. 53). Dworkin, Beckford & Ehrhardt (2007) define sexual scripts as "mutually shared conventions that guide individuals to interdependently carry out sexual scenarios."

The literature I reviewed reveals that Black women were not the only ones aware of these ratios. In one study, a man affirmed this sentiment of the sex ratio facilitating partner concurrency stating "Remember: Black man is in…popular demand" (Bowleg et al., 2011). Another man stated "Guys don't want to put all their eggs in one basket" revealing that men are conscious of the imbalance but they are also happily benefitting from it too (Ferguson et al., 2006). I anticipated this rhetoric would arise as it is often endorsed in private and public conversations among men and women. More problematic, however, is that small shared sexual networks increase the risk of HIV transmission. Since women are at a disadvantage in terms of partner selection, they are especially vulnerable to the consequences of shared sexual networks and accordingly to the risk of HIV infection.

Current scholarship in public health has found that generally Black women's feelings of powerlessness stemmed from the sex ratio imbalance in the Black community. In my summer research, the factor of power emerged as one of the most important indicators for Black women's risk for HIV infection appearing. The general indicator of power in the relationship positively correlated with "dominance over specific sexual decisions, including decisions to use birth control, to use condoms, whether to have sex, and type of sexual activity" (Harvey, Bird, Galavotti, Duncan & Greenberg, 2002). The literature exhibits conflicting findings in the experiences of power which may be due to varying definitions and conceptualizations of power

(Harvey, 2004). Definitions of power are culturally-derived and oftentimes situational (Harvey, 2004); thus, how power is interpreted is equally salient to how it is exercised. For Black women, power and control surfaced most often in relation to the low male to female sex ratio in the Black community (Newsome et al., 2015). There was also an undertone of perceived versus realized power that emerged as a theme within the literature. Black women in one focus group sampled revealed that the greater their "perceived relationship power, the higher [their] reported rates of condom use, birth control, and the more control she [had] over sexual decision-making" (Bontempi et al., 2008). This perception allowed women to "discuss and negotiate the terms of their sexual relationship" in ways that women lacking this control could not (Harvey et al., 2002).

In relationships, individual authority over the other person is uncomfortably shaped by the disposability of their partner. In other words, if a person finds it easier to find another partner due to an imbalanced ratio, they wield more power and agency than the person who cannot do this with the same ease (Harvey et al. 2002). In Black relationships men have a greater pool of Black women to select as potential partners. Consequently, they do not have to endure disagreeable behavior in the way that Black women do, lest they remain single. Black women, conversely, are often put in powerless situations where they must bear the behavior of their partner because they may fear the decreased likelihood of finding another partner who shares their racial identity due to the imbalanced ratio. Ultimately, having total power or a shared feeling of relationship power translated to an increased ability for women to practice safer sex measures (Harvey et al., 2002). On the other hand, Black women "who perceived difficulty in finding suitable African American male partners were less likely to practice consistent condom

use" (Newsome et al., 2015). It can be inferred that if Black women had more options for partner selection, they may feel more autonomy over sexual decision-making.

Guttentag and Secord's, *Too many women? The sex ratio question* illustrates how long this imbalance has existed and the projected reasons for it. They maintain, "in 1970, for the age cohorts most eligible for marriage, there were almost two Black women for every man" (Guttentag and Secord, 1983, p. 201). In this same year, there were significant shortages of Black men in nearly every age category, leaving 30 or more Black women without a potential partner in the marriage pool (Guttentag and Secord, 1983, p. 201). While these statistics are glaring, authors identify social and environmental causes for the low sex ratio during this time. They write "...relative to the white population, a disproportionate number of [Black men] serve in the armed forces overseas and are thus excluded from census records," hence skewing the ratio (Guttentag and Secord, 1983, p. 207). The effect of Black men being overseas was strongly felt for Black women at home. For all ages, the civilian sex ratio was 89 for Blacks and 94 for whites (Guttentag and Secord, 1983, p. 208). Next, authors highlight the higher rates of mortality among Black men due to the lower socioeconomic status of Black families (Guttentag and Secord, p. 208). Lower social status has commonly been linked to poor nutrition, inability to access healthcare systems, which results in increased fatal deaths *in utero* (Larson 2007). All of these variables contributed to what is now understood as an imbalance in sex ratios.

The U.S. Census affirms that Black Americans have the lowest male-female sex ratio of all race/ethnicities, with 90.5 males per every 100 females (U.S. Census, 2002). To place this statistic in the context of HBCUs, let me present another statistic. Kimbrough and Harper (2006) write, "Gender disparities in the college enrollment of African American women and men are the most pronounced of all racial and ethnic groups in higher education. At most colleges and

universities, African American women outnumber their same-race counterparts by a ratio of two to one or more." This promotes an unhealthy social environment whereby Black women are directly or indirectly competing with each other to secure a partner. Since the inception of HBCUs, female students attending these colleges have been the numerical majority, which is both inspiring and a hindrance (Gasman, 2007). Black women are unquestionably excelling as they gain educational capital, and yet it is this very distinction that could be their social drawback.

One study expressed that Black girls are "warned that as African-American women it is likely that they will be left at some point by their African-American male counterpart" (Newsome et al., 2015). Thereafter, these advisories may be internalized and may begin to influence how young Black girls view and understand their Black male peers. Further, it produces an image that Black men and women do not seemingly exist to support each other and that recognition is only complicated by other external variables.

For the past few decades, Black men have been mistreated, surveilled, and incarcerated at unprecedented rates. There are several reasons for this. One has to do with the structure of Black nuclear families and how its segmentation has created a chasm between Black men and women and generational economic and social instability. There is a long and concerning history of the systematic fragmentation of the Black nuclear family which has its origins in a dependency on social welfare programs as a result of a lack of social institutions (Jewell, 1984). I will briefly detail this history to unravel the generational dissension among Black couples and accordingly the deterioration of the Black family. In the late 19th century, following emancipation, the Freedmen's Bureau was established "to alleviate physical suffering, provide legal justice and education, and redistribute southern lands to former slaves freed by the Emancipation

Proclamation" (Beilke, 2014). This was the first form of social services that Blacks received as a regretful acknowledgement of the terrible generational offenses that occurred. Following its disbandment, governmental assistance was not provided to the Black community and as a result Blacks had to take care of each other through "informal neighbor to neighbor" networks (Billingsley, 1972). When the government began providing services to families, "eligibility determination was frequently based on the woman's ability to care for herself and for her children due to the absence of the husband" (Jewell, 1984). Consequently, men were forced to abandon their families so that their wives could receive aid. These policies were not designed to preserve two family households, but, to undermine them (Jewell, 1984). The structural racism wedded in these systems has facilitated a huge chasm between Black men and Black women in our current generation.

Adding to the collapse of Black relationships is our present-day reality today where a significant number of Black males are disproportionately under some form of correctional control. Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, describes it as a "stunningly comprehensive and well-disguised system of racialized social control that functions in a manner strikingly similar to Jim Crow" (Alexander, 2010). This newly crafted caste-system of racial injustice has surfaced in the U.S. to disenfranchise a specific demographic of our population: the Black man. The pandemic incarceration of Black males has large impacts on the structure of the Black family. The leading ramifications are family and marital disruption, long term societal ignominy, injurious perceptions surrounding the Black male, heightened financial strains, and increased risk of poverty. These repercussions are coupled with associated risk factors that are effectively exacerbated by the problem such as lower educational attainment for children. The inability to

access higher levels of educations follows young children into their adult years making it difficult for them to present as viable dating candidates to their Black female partners. All of these realities, effectively reduce the pool of Black men that women can choose from and raise potential health concerns.

To illustrate how this reality has impacted young Black women, I use Stephane Mechoulan's article, "The External Effects of Black Male Incarceration on Black Females." This piece examines how the rise in the incarceration of Black men alongside the sex ratio imbalance is prompting young Black women to reconsider important lifetime decisions. I include Mechoulan's argument not to paint Black women as reactionary beings but to demonstrate how deeply affected they are by the mass incarceration of Black men. Mechoulan (2011) writes "Blacks are now incarcerated at nine times the rate of non-Hispanic whites and comprise more than 40% of inmates." I want readers to pause and recognize how alarming these numbers are as it is far too easy to become desensitized to this information. Mechoulan hypothesized that one of the consequences of incarcerating Black men at these rates is that "free men receive an increase in bargaining power and some would be able to secure more sexual relations" (Mechoulan, 2011). Thus, as a result of being outnumbered by women, men have more power to move through relationships and select partners of their liking. This outcome is consistent with my summer findings in which Black women reported that the shortage of Black men effectively reduced their bargaining power in relationships (Mahay & Laumann, 2004). Mechoulan's study found a "positive effect of [Black] male incarceration on [Black] women's school attainment and early employment" (Mechoulan, 2011). This study is consonant the fact that Black women are academically surpassing other racial groups and with other studies that found that Black women have been overcoming the racial educational gap (Allen et al., 2005) and the racial labor market

gap (Offner & Holzer, 2002; Western & Pettit, 2005) at an accelerated rate than Black men comparative to whites. In fact, Black women have the highest educational attainment of any gender or racial category in the U.S. (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2017). These are all laudable accomplishments and they should be acknowledged as such; however, we ought to be aware of how this gender and racial dissonance is unfolding alongside these achievements.

Mass incarceration and the heightened surveillance of Black male bodies has decreased the pool of Black men transitioning from high school to college. Today, Black men are more likely to have a prison record (22%), than a bachelor's degree (13%) (McDaniel et al., 2011). While the incarceration rates exacerbate this gap, it may not be a causal factor, as historically, Black men have not had the same success as Black women in educational attainment. A few reasons for this are "differential access to educational resources, notably the G.I. Bill, and [that] educated [Black] men [are] largely barred from many of the high-status male-dominated occupations that were available to white men" (McDaniel et al., 2011). All of these realities, effectively reduce the pool of Black men that women can choose from and raise potential health concerns. On the other hand, the Civil Rights and Women's Liberation movement sparked cultural shifts with the introduction of contraceptive technologies that allowed women to control their fertility (Goldin & Katz, 2001). Thus, women had the opportunity to delay having children and to pursue their education.

Aspirations, Relationships, and Accommodations in Black Women's Lives

I began this project with a central issue in mind: the scarcity of available Black men for Black women. However, through the conversations with participants, I noticed themes of racial identity were at work creating limits for what women could do and could not do because of the

number of males of their racial identity in proximity and also due to gendered racial exclusion. Phinney describes racial identity as "an enduring, fundamental aspect of the self that includes a sense of membership in an ethnic group and the attitudes and feelings associated with that membership" (Phinney, 1996). Similarly, the women in my study displayed a commitment to community in their desire to be with Black men despite the imbalance of their representation, social power, and educational attainment levels.

I analyze the socialization of young Black girls and how they are raised to think of themselves and their male peers. Identity and notions of selfhood are explored, as are the structural systems that created these dynamics. I detail my research findings by beginning with a similar study conducted by Ferguson et al. 2006 at an HBCU. I compare how women in this study responded to the imbalance to how women in my study respond to this imbalance. I pay close attention to the language that women use to talk about this phenomenon to understand if there are geographical dimensions influencing these narratives. Next, I juxtapose the main themes and patterns that emerged through our conversations, with findings of some leading researchers in this area of scholarship. This thesis concludes with some recommendations for public health leaders and scholars from all disciplines to consider when addressing these imbalances. My goal is twofold: (1) to determine causations for a low dating pool and (2) to empower Black women to not allow these statistics to define their lives. Thus, there are elements of Black identity woven throughout as the women recount the particular moments in which they come to understand themselves as racial beings. However, this thesis is not purposely centered around racial identity.

Author Positionality

At this point, I want to explain my positionality in this research as I worked carefully to make sure my participants voices come to the fore, while also giving readers a taste of my viewpoint. I was born and raised in Brooklyn, NY to a Black mother and West Indian father. I firmly identify as a Black New Yorker, attending school in North Carolina. From the age of about 15, I was informally advised by my mother to be careful about the men I date. I was never urged to date men of a certain race/ethnicity, but I have always gravitated towards Black men. I was, however, encouraged to date men who were intellectually and financially of my same background. While my mother has never verbalized this, I know she would not approve of a man who did not match me with respect to those qualities. I want readers to bear this in mind because there are particular moments in this thesis where my opinion deviates from that of some of the women and there is rationale for this.

I am returning to the point earlier that I made about my decision to use the word "Black" throughout this thesis. Using the "black," with a lowercase "b" denotes the culture as an adjective for the bodies being studied. In this paper I intentionally use "Black," in its pronoun form to refer to my subjects as individuals engaging in a discourse within their identity of being women within the subject of Blackness. Race is a connection to pride, family, and community; and while we may feel this pride, it brings a lot of difficult choices our way. I am in agreement with W. E. B. Du Bois, who held that "the use of a small letter for the name of twelve million Americans and two hundred million human beings, [is] a personal insult..." (Lewis, 2000). The advantage of this being a non-scientific and anthropological thesis is that it allows me the freedom to explain my positionality to readers and to define terms such as *Black* without the worry of political correctness. Every person with a drop of visible melanin in their skin is placed

in the category of Black, but, really, people identify in a variety of ways. I use *Black* for

consistency and to challenge the common belief that Black and African-American are

interchangeable, when not all individuals hold that to be true. For the purpose of this thesis,

Black encompasses people who describe their skin tone as Black/Brown and/or ethnicity as

African- or Caribbean-descended.

Family Lessons

       We learn many lessons from our family that shape how we come to view ourselves and

those around us. The women I spoke with reveal that the absence of men is important, but

equally salient are the generational expectations and advice that women carry from their mothers

and grandmothers about what constitutes a good man and why. In Stacy's narrative, she

indicated the verbal warnings she received from her great-grandmother:

> "For a long time, I would just tell people I was Dominican because I was ashamed to say
> that I was Black. [My great aunt] told me that my Black skin was undesirable and to stay
> away from Black men because 'Black men like to get women pregnant and leave them.'
> That really impacted me and I was always confused as to why there was such a hatred
> towards Black men. Even just like a few years ago, if I brought someone home who was
> Black or of a darker skin tone, people in my family would not treat him with the same
> respect as one of my cousins who would bring home someone light skin or someone
> white. But at least with my mother, my mother has never been that way. She's always
> [said] 'love who you want to love.'"

Stacy's story is unique and her firm choice for Black men despite the derogatory remarks she

learned, is noteworthy. From other women, I learned that their childhood environments and the

presence or absence of Black men influences their positive and negative perception of Black

men. Nicole states:

> "Growing up, I always had positive images of Black men. I was surrounded by my dad
> and grandfather and I thought that Black men worked hard and provided for their family.
> It wasn't until I was in middle school--and later in college--that I began to hear and
> experience negative things about Black men."

This makes sense, but I was more surprised to learn of the ways that women resisted these verbal warnings and observed surroundings, illustrated by what one woman says: "I should have the independence to be able to choose who I would necessarily want to be with and not only be focused on my race to fulfill some higher meaning of racial status and power." In a separate interview, another woman expressed, "I challenged [what my great-grandmother said] ...I wouldn't say I made an effort, but I've always just gravitated towards dating within my own race and I made sure to tell my family that 'hey, this isn't something negative and it's okay to be proud to be Black.'" I was captivated by how grounded women were in their convictions for their preferences because I recognize how easy it is to endorse information received from family by default. It is this dynamic of choice that I want to highlight. The women I interviewed were resolute in their preference for Black men in ways that began to show how complex their social worlds are.

Relationships

In our conversations, there were definitional discrepancies in how to qualify certain relationships that arose. The main two characterizations of relationships that emerged were "talking" and "situationships." This diction is unique to and created by the Black community as other race/ethnicities often use words such as "hooking up" or "dating" to describe their experiences. The women I talked with referred to guys they "used to talk to" or in retrospect, clarified an association with a past partner as a "situationship." Upon asking women to expound on these, there was a visible difficulty in defining it, in part because they assumed I knew what they meant. Some even, communicated nonverbally with a look of frustration and of "you know what I mean." One woman defined *talking* as "getting to know someone through daily

communication." She also described a *situationship* as "a relationship that does not necessarily mean both parties are mutually exclusive. Both people can be consistent and inconsistent with daily communication without explanation." As I understand it, *situationships* are a "no-strings attached" contract which provides a basis for parties to be involved in non-monogamous relationships.

A different woman shared:

> "Situationships are always harder on females because we want an explanation and are always hoping it will turn into an actual relationship. You begin to realize how important having a title is to assert your connection to someone. Part of the problem is that young girls--and I was one of these girls--get used to this treatment. They don't even know what a relationship is, or what it means to date. Now people just 'talk' and have 'situationships.'" - Nicole

Nicole's comment struck a chord with me because it displayed an element of passivity that our current generation of women are experiencing. Certainly not all women are accepting or experiencing this behavior but to know that some are is upsetting. I was fascinated there was not a woman who firmly stated I am or was in a relationship, as though the word carried too much significance, rather, they employed phrases such as "I'm currently seeing someone" or "talking to someone." I include these terms to preserve the difference in language. This is an implicit reinforcement of Black community and the way that individuals who are part of that group talk about this issue. The question of what is negotiable and what is non-negotiable in women's vision of a relationship resonated powerfully in ways that started to uncover the many variables that are difficult to reconcile in a woman's life; in fact, they do not reconcile very well. Women expressed that their expectations of an ideal relationship did not always neatly align with their reality and that there was often some negotiating on their end. Michelle said:

> "I didn't even realize I was dating down at the time. I used to just say 'Oh, he's immature. He'll change.' I was caught up in false hope. It wasn't until I was with a man

who respected me, that I recognized I had previously given up parts of myself to secure what I wanted most at the time: a relationship."

Most women desired a relationship with a man who was near her age or a few years older. Their reasoning for wanting to date older was the assumption that with age, came maturity. Things that were non-negotiable were poor treatment by their partner, lack of ambition, and occupation. Some women raised personal preferences such as wanting a man with emotional intelligence, a devout Christian, and someone who wanted the same number of children.

One woman said:

> "I would like someone who at least has a bachelor's degree…[well] associate's or bachelor's degree. I will say [at least an] associate's degree, *if* they have the skills and...have made the connections or networked to where they [are in a] space where they are comfortable and doing well, even with an associate's degree, then that's fine because, you know...whatever." - Nicole

Two other women echoed this sentiment:

> "I'm willing to work with someone who doesn't have a bachelor's degree...but only if that person realizes that where they are at isn't where they need to be. If they are willing to work towards getting a degree or advancing themselves in their career." - Angie

> "I don't have any specific requirements for educational attainment because I know school is not everyone's forte...let's say he did go to high school but he worked his way to wherever he is...I'm fine with that." - Diamond

I was surprised to hear that college-educated women would be comfortable dating a man with a lower educational attainment. More than surprised, I interpreted this language as women dating down and the worry I had hearing these statements derive from the family lessons that I learned growing up. Only one woman brought up the financial background of a potential partner maintaining that her potential partner must have "...an employment plan making at least 60k a year...in the beginning." These elements resonated with me in light of how much weight I place on the factor of earned income. In the U.S., Black women earn 66% of Associate degrees and

64% of Bachelor degrees, leaving an educational attainment of 34% of Associate degrees and 36% of Bachelor degrees being obtained by Black men in the Black community (U.S. Department of Education & National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). One woman, Diann, stated "I do not have time for any grown man without a college education. It's not even about the money, but if you didn't go to college we just don't have the same life." Evidently, this woman places a high value on the educational attainment of a potential partner. More than a marker of financial capability, for Diann, college and the experiences acquired there are a sense of connection to similar intellect and aspirations. Further, she was honest with herself that she could not relate to someone devoid of this background.

Many women relayed that they met potential partners through dating apps such as Bumble or Tinder or through mutual friends. A few noted that they preferred the latter, but in the current dating climate, dating apps have surfaced as the expected norm. When asked about their preference for meeting men through friends, one woman stated "I'm very traditional when it comes to dating and it is hard to find traditional. So I just try to be accommodating." This was another example where I regarded women were dealing with their current social environments, despite wanting different dating experiences.

Public Health Concerns

Through my summer research, I found that Black women observed how the sex ratio imbalance corresponded with partner concurrency among Black men (Ferguson et al., 2006). Although women in this study did not always explicitly state the imbalances, their language implied that they were adapting to these circumstances. In the Ferguson et al. 2006 study, conducted on a HBCU campus, a female student stated "I'd rather just chill with my girls,"

revealing that the dating scene was unfavorable for women. In this same study, women shared that the "drought on campus," coupled with men on campus dating multiple women, led them to explore options away from the university community (Ferguson et al., 2006). Two studies illustrated how this imbalance favored black men and facilitated an environment where black men could have multiple partners because of the greater availability of women (Ferguson et al., 2006; Bowleg et al., 2011). Women had a keen awareness of the gender ratio imbalance even if they did not have the technical language to describe this phenomenon. Similar to the Ferguson et al. 2006 study, a young woman I spoke with, Angie, raised the issue of multiple sex partners asserting:

> "I feel like [Black] men aren't often honest about their own current relationships or partners or at least the girl that considers themselves their girlfriend. And these men are always trying to be with other women and play the field because they know that they have this...not necessarily power over women but because there is such a limited supply...it feels like they can kind of put themselves onto multiple women."

Angie's point is consistent with scholars in the field who indicate that non-monogamous sexual activity paired with the sex ratio imbalance at HBCUs promotes an environment where Black women are knowingly or unknowingly involved with men who have more than one sexual partner (Croteau et al. 1993; Ferguson et al. 2006). Stacy, a Criminology major, identified the mass incarceration of Black men as one of the leading causes of this disproportion. I include her major to highlight that the lens through which she acknowledges this problem is grounded in her research as a scholar, and yet she understands herself to be intimately affected as an individual. Stacy asserted "Most prisons in the states are privately owned and the majority of those in prison—in the juvenile justice system and in the adult system—are Black and Latino. It leaves all these girls--all these Black women--without a partner because they've taken many of our Black men away from us."

Another woman stated:

> "I think there are plenty of Black men, however, are they doing the same things that the Black women are doing? That's been proven not to be true. Black women are the highest educated, subsection of race in America. That is not true for Black men. So, I don't think it's that they are unavailable, I think it's that they are doing different things with their time. And I think that is also reflective of the school to prison pipeline and the culture that they grew up in." - Taylor

Jordan said:

> "I think part of it is just the stress of growing up Black in America for most people… [Recently I read an article] talking about how even when you control for what Black people eat, they still have higher outcomes of heart issues, cardiovascular issues, and diabetes. People are starting to wonder, does that stem from what we're eating or how active we are? Or does that stem from decades of social stress? Of economic stress? And people are looking into gene expression and how that is affected by stress and if that passed down generationally."

These women are mindful of the socio-political stressors that are affecting Black Americans and their thoughts are grounded in leading scholarship today. Studies show that racial discrimination has a profound impact on preterm and low-birthweight deliveries (Mustillo et al., 2004). Their comments are thoughtful and illuminate the injustices affecting our community, but the women confront and are not consumed by their reality.

Racial Preferences

The common assumption that Black women want to date Black men is nearly an established fact, but there is good reason for this. The literature reveals that Black people prefer to choose sexual partners of the same race as themselves (Laumann & Youm, 1999). I am not saying this is inaccurate, rather it improperly naturalizes Black women's desire to choose Black men. It naturalizes race to a category and suggests that Black women have no voice in decision-making because they assumedly all want Black men. This shows the naturalization in public health. In one sense it is objectively true that this happens; however, on the other hand, it is

missing the humanity, subtlety, and complexities behind this preference, all of which are particularly urgent for women of color in college at this time.

The women I interviewed referenced familial expectations, and representations of Black partnerships in their household that shaped their inclination to want to be with Black men. Nicole said "My grandparents asked would I ever date outside of my race...I don't want to, but I have also never been approached by anyone outside of my race." Evidently, there was social and cultural work that led her to this preference. One of the inclusion criterion for participants was that they be interested in dating Black, heterosexual men. This criterion was not meant to exclude other races, but to arrive at a deeper understanding of where this preference stems from and to challenge blanketed assumptions that all Black women prefer to date Black men. One woman stated "White men hardly look in my direction" as her reason for wanting a Black man. I want to unpack this sentiment because I think there is a cultural divergence in how Black men and white men approach Black women. Generally--not always--Black men are more forward about approaching their female counterparts and white men do so more reservedly. Neither advance is better or worse, but I want readers to be clear on the cultural and racial variance in dating practices that brought Nicole to be of that opinion.

Another woman held:

> "I always assumed that I would marry a Black man...I think they are fantastic people. I think that the culture and society we have in America is pressed against them and I think that the school to prison pipeline is a real thing that has a negative impact on their ability to be economically mobile as well as raise families. I know some people who are very intelligent, very talented, they are in school right now but they have misdemeanors and so it's going to be difficult for them even after they graduate to kind of overcome that barrier because of things that they did to help provide for their families." - Taylor

Again, Taylor introduces the phenomenon of mass incarceration, however, this time she places it in the context of her unwavering support of and desire to be with a Black man, despite

the social injustices they face. Her choice to want to be with them reveals a commitment to

community and it is this texture that public health scholarship often does not capture.

Angie stated:

> "I prefer men that are my color and darker...not lighter people. I don't know why...maybe because my dad is light skinned[3]...but that's an overarching issue. I think that colorism is very triggering in the Black community and unfortunately it still waves its flag in present day."

Jessica shared:

> "It's important to me to date a Black man because I am frankly tired of explaining to people how the Black experience in America differs so drastically from almost everyone else's experience...then having to prove it and reinforce it in my personal life would just be more than I desire to do."

Her remark was infused with frustration that I could feel in her utterance. Her statement

reveals this is no longer a difference of degree (in terms of preferring skin tones), but a

difference of kind. Jessica was visibly exhausted with the prospect of having to explain the Black

struggle to someone not of the community; and I empathize with this opinion because I

understand where her fatigue derives from. Culturally, there are things unique to the Black

community that even if explained to an outsider, may not fully be understood. Moreover, it is not

necessarily the job of our culture to bring others up to speed.

The subject of interracial relationships is highly contested in the Black community and it

often raises debates about cultural differences and the fetishization of Black bodies. In media and

in social spheres, Black men are depicted as criminals to be feared, but also as hyper-masculine

and sexualized bodies (Collins, 2004). The dissonance between these perceptions is striking. But

more problematic is the hypersexualization of Black women paired with their yet unwantedness.

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[3] A note on Angie. Angie's father was never present in her life. She was raised by her mother and her grandmother. Her rejection of men who are of the same skin color as her father might be her way of protecting herself from anticipated abandonment. It may also be her way of gaining control of her life that was disrupted as a child.

Diann said:

> "Everyone wants the girl that *looks* Black but no one wants the *Black* girl. It's a fact. No one wants us for real."

A study by Feliciano, Robnett, and Komaie (2009) revealed the gendered racial preferences of white daters. White men were more receptive to dating non-whites than white women "but they are only more open to dating non-black minority groups" (Feliciano et al., 2009). Furthermore, white men were two times more likely than their white female counterparts to exclude Black women (Feliciano et al., 2009). Additionally, a small subset of white women have a preference for *only* Black men (Feliciano et al., 2009). The gendered exclusion of Blacks is distinct and problematic as it perpetuates the rates at which Black women are completely left out of the dating pool. If women are struggling to enter the dating scene, it is possible this signals that they will encounter difficulties when trying to settle down with a lifelong partner.

The assumption that Black women want Black men is no longer a given as some of the women revealed there was a type of social and cultural work happening in their generation to set up an alternative option to dating Black men. In truth, we risk oversimplifying the equation that Black women must have Black men. That automatic equation is an automatic limitation. When women limit themselves, they may risk being disheartened by the outcome. That is not to say that dating outside of one's race is the solution, but it should at least be able to present as a viable option. Today, Black women are considering broadening their preferences. Some women are frustrated with the tendency for Black males to marry non-Black females. Thus, the shift to dating outside of their race--even when their preference for Black men is strong--is not shocking. In my conversations, it was apparent that certain circumstances arose to allow cross-cultural relationships to become a prospect for women. In my conversations with women there were some interesting attitudes regarding the prospect of dating outside their race. One woman stated:

"I've had Black males ask me 'can you talk to my white girlfriend and teach her to be culturally more in tune with us?' and I'm like if that's the point then just get a Black girl. [There are these] instance where it doesn't make sense. It's like you want a Black woman but you don't...and I feel [as though] for a lot of Black men who are successful, having a white wife is a symbol of status for whatever reason." - Taylor

People who were once strongly interested in Black men, are seriously contemplating dating out of their race which reveals that is truly a problem for some women. Taylor held:

"I'm down with the swirl [referring to dating white men]. The statistics are worrisome as far as race is concerned, but individually it doesn't concern me. I'll just get a white boy."

While Taylor said this lightheartedly, studies show that the intersection between racial and gender stereotypes may have significant implications for her dating opportunities (Galinsky et al., 2013). In the Galinsky et al. (2013) study, researchers hypothesized that white men would prefer Asian women over Black women; and that white women would prefer Black men to Asian men. Researchers suggested that preferences for masculinity and femininity would determine which race/ethnicity men were favored. They tested this theory by measuring "relative preference for masculinity by subtracting femininity preference from masculinity preference" and "determined relative preference for Blacks versus Asians by subtracting attraction to Asians from attraction to Blacks" (Galinsky et al., 2013). They found that masculine attributes were more commonly associated with the word *Black* and feminine attributes were more commonly associated with the word *Asian*. According to Collins (2004), Black women are often presumed to not possess the physical and behavioral features of idealized (white) femininity. Additionally, a study by Goff, Thomas, and Jackson (2008) discovered that participants often mistook Black female faces for Black males because they viewed them as more masculine. This connects to my earlier mention of the portrayal of Black women. As researchers predicted, white men had a romantic preference for Asians than to Blacks and white women had a romantic preference for Black men (Galinsky et al., 2013). This confirms my previous comments that stereotypes of

Black women negatively mark them in ways whereby they are perceived as less desirable and consequently are sidelined in the dating pool.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has illuminated the structural barriers that complicate the dating experiences of Black women. I open with the low male-to-female sex ratios that exists among Black Americans. I reveal how, historically, Black women and men have not existed to support each other and how this reality is exacerbated by the mass incarceration of Black men. I have displayed how this streamlining to prison systems is effectively widening the educational attainment gap between Black men and women, thus preventing Black men from presenting as viable potential partners to their female counterparts. Further, the gendered and racialized stereotypes of Black people have different effects on men and women. Studies show that Black women are conventionally labeled as unfeminine and assured, and white men are less likely to date them. Black men, however, are categorized as criminals and hyper-masculine, and white women are *still* attracted to them. While this attraction is not necessarily bad, this gendered, racial bias unfavorably positions Black women as they are socially perceived as unwanted and have a further reduced pool of Black men to select. I detail how Black women understand themselves to be situated within these structural vulnerabilities and how they challenge and complicate existing narratives about what their life trajectory ought to look like. I unveil the accommodations they make

Public health scholarship has largely understudied how Black women are making sense of these structural vulnerabilities. This thesis has unveiled the humanity of Black women and the struggles they face as they try to make meaningful lives in the midst of powerful social forces. The women I interviewed are aware of these environments but they are not crippled by them. There is an image of the prototypical disempowered Black women, but that disempowerment is part of her power. These young women demonstrate power in their commitment to community as

they are firm in their preference for the men they wish to be with, despite what they observe and learn and in contrast to what many of them are socialized to value. In addition, I show that Black women are not singular beings coping with these issues. They think differently in some aspects and are in agreement in others. As you read, their opinions are not static but evolve with experience. The study of this phenomenon from the perspective of the Black male perspective is also lacking in the literature. Similar to how this study has offered perspectives on how women grapple with dating opportunities and create alternatives for themselves, having a counter study using conversations with Black men at HBCUs to assess their position would be equally relevant. Moreover, it would be powerful to have a study that brings Black men and women into conversation with each other to dismantle some of the pervading narratives that exist. Further, it would be fascinating to explore to what extent the experiences of Black students attending HBCUs mirror that of their peers attending predominantly white institutions.

This research matters to me as Black woman trying to unravel why my generation is experiencing these obstacles and what this means for our future. While the women I interviewed, display hope as they reckon with these issues, I am not convinced that finding an alternative to the man I envision myself with is an option. In fact, I know I would lose part of myself through that accommodation. That is not to say, I have a despondent view of the future, rather, I recognize that in order to increase the dating prospects for Black women, our society must undergo deep introspection and broad societal reflection on the structural systems that have exacerbated this imbalance. It requires a cultural shift and a movement past what we feel to what we know. My hope is that this thesis reminds public health leaders to not lose sight of the humanity of the people they aim to serve. We do a disservice to vulnerable populations when we fail to amplify their voices and hear their individual stories. In fact, we risk misidentifying what

we deem is a problem and not hearing what communities affirm is a hindrance. Finally, by being aware of the varied experiences Black women are having as they seek mates, one may be able to gain a more in-depth understanding of the formation of the Black family.

APPENDIX

Guiding Interview Questions

1. Please talk to me about what you recall hearing about Black men when you were younger. Are there any distinct stories or phrases that you recall your parents (perhaps your mother) telling you? Or can you share some conceptions you hold about Black men and their place in relationships that you readily saw through parents, family members, close friends, etc.?

2. Next, I'd like you to describe your ideal relationship. About how old would he be? How would he treat you?

3. Given that none of us are perfect, describe your ideal relationship. About how old would he be? What's negotiable? What's non-negotiable?

4. Typically, how do you go about selecting a potential partner? Through what outlets are you able to find potential partners?

5. In any of your past relationships have you ever felt you were dating down because you wanted someone to be with you and felt/knew they weren't at your level (academically, mentally, spiritually)?

6. Why is important for you to date/be with a Black man?

7. According to public health literature "African-Americans have the greatest gender-ratio imbalance compared to other racial groups in the United States" (Newsome, 2013). Consequently, we have this dynamic where Black women are not left with a lot of partners to choose from. Please tell me what you make of this. Does this resonate with you? Does it speak to your experience(s)? What is missing here?

8. Prior to our interview, had you ever heard of phrases such as "low male to female sex ratio" and/or "limited partner availability"?

9. Do you see this phenomenon of limited partner availability being linked to public health concerns? If so, in what way? If not, how would you catalog this dynamic?

10. According to researcher Cherlin "African Americans are proportionately the largest group of unmarried people in the United States" and "They are, as a group, the least likely to marry, stay married, or remarry" (Cherlin 1992). As a Black woman, and do you think that this phenomenon of unavailable men will affect your future prospects?

11. If marriage is something you are considering, do you think that this phenomenon of unavailable men will affect your future prospects?

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