

Black Sexual Politics

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**PART I**

**AFRICAN AMERICANS  
AND THE NEW RACISM**

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## WHY BLACK SEXUAL POLITICS?

2001: The career of Jennifer Lopez skyrockets. A Puerto Rican woman, Lopez's rise to fame came after her feature film appearance as Selena, the first Chicana superstar. News of J-Lo is everywhere; especially her much discussed love relationship and subsequent break-up with hip-hop artist Puff Daddy (aka P Diddy). One special feature of Lopez's routinely makes the news—her seemingly large bottom. From late night American talk shows to South African radio programs to Internet websites, J-Lo's butt is all the rage. Recognizing its value, it is rumored that Lopez insures her buttocks for 1 billion dollars, as one website mischievously described it, 500 million dollars per cheek.

2000: The photo insert for *Survivor*, Destiny's Child third CD, shows the three African American women standing legs akimbo, holding hands, and dressed in animal skin bikinis. Selling over 15 million albums and singles worldwide, *Survivor's* success reflects a savvy marketing strategy that promoted the song "Independent Woman" as part of the soundtrack for the hit movie *Charlie's Angels* and foreshadowed the success of group member Beyoncé Knowles. *Survivor's* message of female power also fuels its popularity. Counseling women to be resilient and financially independent,

Destiny's Child proclaim, "I'm a survivor, I'm gonna make it." *Survivor* suggests sexual independence as well. In their highly popular song "Bootylicious," written by Beyoncé, they refer to their butts as "jelly" and ask, "Can you handle it?" The term *bootylicious* proves to be so popular that, along with *hottie* and *roadrage*, it is added to the 2002 edition of *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*.

1925: Born in a poor community in East St. Louis, Missouri, African American entertainer Josephine Baker moves to Paris. She becomes a sensation in the American production of *La Revue Nègre*. Performing bare-breasted in a jungle setting and clad only in a short skirt of banana leaves, Ms. Baker's rump-shaking banana dance becomes an instant hit with Parisian audiences. When asked whether she will return to the United States, Ms. Baker replies, "they would make me sing mammy songs and I cannot feel mammy songs, so I cannot sing them." Instead, in 1937 Ms. Baker becomes a French citizen and garners lifelong accolades as the "Black Venus" of France. Upon her death in 1975, she receives a twenty-one-gun salute, the only such honor given by France to an American-born woman.<sup>1</sup>

1816: After several years of being exhibited in Paris and London as the "Hottentot Venus," Sarah Bartmann, a Khoi woman from what is now South Africa, dies. In the London exhibit, she is displayed caged, rocking back and forth to emphasize her supposedly wild and dangerous nature. She wears a tight-fitting dress whose brown color matches her skin tones. When ordered to do so, she leaves her cage and parades before the audience who seems fascinated with what they see as her most intriguing feature—her buttocks. Some in the audience are not content to merely look. One eyewitness recounts with horror how Bartmann endures poking and prodding, as people try to ascertain for themselves whether her buttocks are real. In the context of popular London shows that display as forms of entertainment talking pigs, animal monsters and human oddities such as the Fattest Man on Earth, midgets, giants, and similar "freaks of nature," these reactions to Bartmann's exhibition are not unusual. Upon Sarah Bartmann's death, George Cuvier, one of the fathers of

modern biology, claims her body in the interests of science. Her subsequent dissection becomes one of at least seven others completed on the bodies of women of color from 1814 to 1870. Their goal—to advance the field of classical comparative anatomy.<sup>2</sup>

Contemporary sexual politics in the United States present African American women and men with a complicated problem. From the display of Sarah Bartmann as a sexual "freak" of nature in the early nineteenth century to Josephine Baker dancing bare-breasted for Parisian society to the animal-skin bikinis worn by "bootylicious" Destiny's Child to the fascination with Jennifer Lopez's buttocks, women of African descent have been associated with an animalistic, "wild" sexuality. Expressed via an ever-changing yet distinctive constellation of sexual stereotypes in which Sarah Bartmann's past frames J-Lo's present, this association of sexuality with Black women helps create ideas about racial difference. Black men have their own variety of racial difference, also constructed from ideas about violence and dangerous sexuality. African American heavyweight boxer Jack Johnson certainly sparked controversy when, in 1910, he fought the formerly unbeaten White champion Jim Jeffries. During the fight itself, over 30,000 men stood outside the *New York Times*' offices, waiting to hear the outcome. Johnson's bloody victory sparked race riots in every Southern state. Johnson's predilection for White women only fueled the fires of White reaction. When authorities discovered that Johnson was having an affair with an eighteen-year-old blonde from Minnesota, they charged him under the Mann Act with engaging in white slavery. Johnson's ability to wield violence and his seeming attractiveness to White women made him threatening to White middle-class men.<sup>3</sup> For both women and men, Western social thought associates Blackness with an imagined uncivilized, wild sexuality and uses this association as one lynchpin of racial difference. Whether depicted as "freaks" of nature or as being the essence of nature itself, savage, untamed sexuality characterizes Western representations of women and men of African descent.<sup>4</sup>

For their respective audiences, the distinctive sexualized spectacles performed by Bartmann, Baker, Destiny's Child, and Lopez invoke sexual meanings that give shape to racism, sexism, class exploitation, and heterosexism. Each spectacle marks the contradictions of Western perceptions of African bodies and of Black women's agency concerning the use of their

bodies. Together they frame an invented discourse of *Black sexuality*.<sup>5</sup> For French and British audiences, Sarah Bartmann served as a sign of racial difference used to justify the growing belief in the superiority of White civilization and the inferiority of so-called primitive peoples necessary for colonialism. Her treatment helped create modern Black sexual stereotypes of the jezebel, the mammy, and the welfare queen that, in the United States, helped uphold slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and racial ghettoization.<sup>6</sup> Illustrating through stark historical example how common sense understandings of race and gender flow smoothly into those of biology, medicine, and Western science itself, her body marked the intersection of entertainment, science, and commerce. Sarah Bartmann could be enjoyed while alive and, upon her death, studied under the microscope for the burgeoning field of comparative anatomy. As South African writer Yvette Abrahams and filmmaker Zola Maseko's video recording on the life of Bartmann point out, we know little about Bartmann's agency in this arrangement.<sup>7</sup> What Bartmann lost by being displayed as a "freak" is far clearer to us through our modern sensibilities than what she might have gained for herself and her family.

Bartmann may not have been aware of the power of the sexual stereotypes that were created in her image, but women of African descent who followed most certainly were.<sup>8</sup> Black women struggled to exercise agency and self-definition concerning these images and the social practices that they defended. Evidently aware of the sexual stereotypes applied to women of African descent, Josephine Baker played the part of the "primitive," but for her own reasons.<sup>9</sup> Baker entertained the French with her openness about her body, an important example of how an imagined, uncivilized, wild sexuality remained associated with Blackness within Western social thought and continued as a sign of racial difference. But was Baker really sexually liberated, or was her performance a carefully planned illusion that, in the African American trickster tradition, was designed to titillate and manipulate the tastes of her European audiences? Baker's biography suggests a level of sophistication that enabled her to move far beyond her initial depiction as a bare-breasted "primitive." Baker may have initially done banana dances, but from her point of view, she escaped performing the ubiquitous "mammy songs" assigned to Hattie McDaniel, Ethel Waters, and other talented African American women then performing in the United States. In France, Baker ensured that she was well compensated for her performances.

The work of contemporary artists such as Destiny's Child also invokes the contradictions of sexualized spectacle and Black women's agency or self-determination. Transported from the immediacy of live stage performances, Destiny's Child perform in the intimate yet anonymous terrain of CDs, music videos, movies, Internet websites, and other forms of contemporary mass media. Here each consumer of "Independent Woman" or "Bootylicious" can imagine a one-on-one relationship with one, two, or all three members of Destiny's Child, whose images and artistry are purchased, rented, or downloaded under the control of the consumer. Under conditions of racial segregation, mass media provides a way that racial difference can safely enter racially segregated private spaces of living rooms and bedrooms. Destiny's Child may not be like the girls next door, but they can be seen on home theater and heard via headphones within the privacy of individual consciousness. In this new mass media context, Black sexual stereotypes are rendered virtually invisible by their ubiquity; yet, they persist through a disconnected *mélange* of animal skins, sexually explicit lyrics, breast worship, and focus on the booty. Destiny's Child may entertain and titillate; yet, their self-definitions as "survivors" and "independent women" express female power and celebration of the body and booty. The women in Destiny's Child are also wealthy. Just who is being "controlled" in these new arenas? For what purpose? Their message contains a defiance denied to Bartmann and Baker—"It's my body, it's my booty, and I'll do what I want with it—can you handle it?"

What are we to make of Jennifer Lopez? As a Latina,<sup>10</sup> where does she fit in this story of Western constructions of "wild" Black sexuality, the social construction of racial difference, and Black people's reactions to them? Like Josephine Baker before her, Jennifer Lopez is celebrated and makes a considerable amount of money. Elevating Jennifer Lopez's buttocks to icon status invokes historical meanings of Black female sexuality and takes the politics of race and sexuality to an entirely new plane. In this case, a Latina brushed with the hint of Blackness and not clearly of African descent carries the visible sign of Black sexuality. In order to be marketed, Black sexuality need not be associated solely with bodies that have been racially classified as "Negro," "mulatto," or "Black." Western imaginations have long filled in the color, moving women from Black to White and back again depending on the needs of the situation. In antebellum Charleston, South Carolina, and New Orleans, Louisiana, White men

desired quadroons and octoroons as prostitutes because such women looked like White women, but they were actually Black women, with all that that implied about women's sexuality.<sup>11</sup> J-Lo's fluid ethnicity in her films, from the Chicana in *Selena* to the racial/ethnic ambiguity in subsequent roles, illustrates the shifting contours of racial/ethnic classification. When it comes to "hot-blooded" Latinas, one might ask which part of their "blood" carries the spice of sexual looseness?<sup>12</sup> This all seems to be a far cry from the commodification of Sarah Bartmann's buttocks—or is it?

The fact that these examples involve women of actual or imputed African descent is no accident because the racial difference assigned to Black people has often come in gender specific forms. In the nineteenth century, women stood as symbols of race and women from different races became associated with differentially valued expressions of sexuality. During this period marked by the rise of European nationalism, England, France, Spain, Portugal, Germany, the Netherlands, and Italy all jockeyed with varying degrees of success to define themselves as nation-states. Each followed its own distinctive path in constructing its own national identity and that of its colonies. Yet they shared one overriding feature—the treatment of women within each respective nation-state as well as within the colonies were important to national identity.<sup>13</sup> Ideas of pure White womanhood that were created to defend women of the homeland required a corresponding set of ideas about hot-blooded Latinas, exotic Suzy Wongs, wanton jezebels, and stoic native squaws. Civilized nation-states required uncivilized and backward colonies for their national identity to have meaning, and the status of women in both places was central to this entire endeavor. In this context, Black women became icons of hypersexuality.<sup>14</sup>

—Men of African descent were also seen as hypersexual beings that have generated similar icons.<sup>15</sup> During the era of live entertainment, and until the onset of the technologies that made mass media possible, men were objectified differently from women. The West African slave trade and Southern auction blocks treated both Black women's and men's bodies as objects for sale, yet women participated in sexual spectacles to a greater degree than did men, because Western ideas about women and femininity itself have long been more tightly wedded to ideas about women's physical beauty and sexual attractiveness. Even today, men are far more likely to stare at and comment upon women's breasts, buttocks, legs, face, and other body parts than are women to subject men's bodies to this type of scrutiny. Like

all women, Black women were objects to be seen, enjoyed, purchased, and used, primarily by White men with money. African women's sexuality may have piqued the prurient interest of Western audiences, but African men's sexuality was seen as dangerous and in need of control. Live expressions of Black male sexuality needed to be hidden from White spectators, especially audiences that might contain White women. Until recently, the very tenets of female respectability made it impossible for a female audience to cheer on a live male sex show, especially a White female audience viewing Black men as sexual beings. Assumptions of heterosexuality also inhibit males viewing other males as sexual objects. A situation in which White men view Black male bodies as sexual objects potentially creates a homoerotic space that is incompatible with ideas of straight White masculinity.

Mass media technologies profoundly altered this reliance on face-to-face spectatorship and live entertainment. Television, video, DVD, and the Internet enabled images of Black women and men to enter living rooms, bedrooms, family rooms, and other private domestic spaces. Black male images could now enter private White spaces, one step safely removed because these were no longer live performances and Black men no longer appeared in the flesh. These technological advances enabled the reworking of Black male sexuality that became much more visible, yet was safely contained. Take, for example, the stylized music video performances of hip-hop artists. Camera angles routinely are shot from a lower position than the rapper in question, giving the impression that he is looming over the viewer. In real life, being this close to young African American men who were singing about sex and violence and whose body language included fists, angry gestures, and occasional crotch-grabbing might be anxiety provoking for the typical rap and hip-hop consumer (most are suburban White adolescents). Yet viewing these behaviors safely packaged within a music video protects consumers from any possible contact with Black men who are actually in the videos. Just who are these videos for? What are the imagined race, gender, and sexual orientations of the viewers? Black men have long given performances that placed sexuality center stage—Elvis Presley, Mick Jagger, and rapper Eminem all recognized and profited from this reality—but the sexual implications of viewing Black men in the flesh rarely made it out of African American settings where such performances had a different meaning. It is one thing to visit a Black nightclub to hear singer Millie Jackson's live performance of raunchy blues or gather in a neighbor's living room to

listen to Redd Foxx records. It is entirely another to sit in an interracial audience and listen to comedian Eddie Murphy's uncensored boasting concerning Black male sexual prowess; or to count the times within a music video that the camera hones in on rapper Ja Rule's crotch.

Western perceptions of the sexuality of men of African descent also became central to the national identities of European nation-states engaged in colonial projects. England, France, and other colonial powers constructed their national identities by manipulating ideas about men in the home country and in their colonies. The United States followed a similar path, with ideas about race and masculinity intertwined with ideas about American citizenship.<sup>16</sup> Like their female counterparts, men of African descent were also perceived to have excess sexual appetite, yet with a disturbing additional feature, a predilection for violence. In this context, the "White heroes" of Western Europe and the United States became constructed in relation to the "Black beasts" of Africa.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, both were used to signal the hierarchical relationship between colonizers and colonies. Overall, colonialism, slavery, and racial segregation relied upon this discourse of Black sexuality to create tightly bundled ideas about Black femininity and Black masculinity that in turn influenced racial ideologies and racial practices.

As these systems of racial rule recede in the post-civil rights era, what if anything is taking their place? Over one hundred years ago, African American intellectual William E. B. DuBois predicted that the problem of the twentieth century would be the presence of the color line. By that, DuBois meant that the policies of colonialism and racial segregation were designed to create, separate, and rank the various "races" of man. Until legally outlawed in the 1950s and 1960s, the color line policies of Jim Crow racial segregation kept the vast majority of African Americans from quality educations, good jobs, adequate health care, and the best neighborhoods. In contrast, the problem of the twenty-first century seems to be the seeming *absence* of a color line. Formal legal discrimination has been outlawed, yet contemporary social practices produce virtually identical racial hierarchies as those observed by DuBois. By whatever measures used in the United States or on a global scale, people of African descent remain disproportionately clustered at the bottom of the social hierarchy. The effects of these historical exclusions persist today under a new racism.<sup>18</sup>

It is important to note that the new racism of the early twenty-first century has not replaced prior forms of racial rule, but instead incorpo-

rates elements of past racial formations. As a result, ideas about race, gender, sexuality, and Black people as well as the social practices that these ideas shape and reflect remain intricately part of the new racism, but in changed ways. The new racism thus reflects a situation of permanence and change. Just as people of African descent were disadvantaged within prior forms of economic organization, a similar outcome exists today. On a global scale, wealth and poverty continue to be racialized. This is permanence. At the same time, racial hierarchy is produced in a context of massive economic, political, and social change that organizes racial hierarchy differently. The processes used to maintain the same outcome are also different. In a similar fashion, ideas about sexuality and gender that were very much a part of prior forms of racial rule remain as important today. They too are differently organized to produce remarkably similar results.

First, new forms of global capitalism frame the new racism. Globalization itself is certainly not new—it was a core characteristic of former patterns of racism. The African slave trade had a global reach and its legacy created the contemporary African Diaspora. The colonial wealth of Europe was based on a global system of racial subordination of people of color. Yet the increasing concentration of capital in the hands of fewer and fewer corporations distinguishes the contemporary global capitalism from its nineteenth-century counterpart. Today, relatively few transnational corporations are driving the world economy and their decisions affect the global distribution of wealth and poverty. These new forms of global organization have polarized world populations. On one end are elites who are wealthy beyond the imagination, and who have the freedom to come and go as they please, wherever and whenever they want. The locals, the people who are stuck in one place, without jobs, and for whom time seems to creep by, populate the other end.<sup>19</sup>

People of African descent are routinely disadvantaged in this global economy in which corporations make the decisions and in which "the company is free to move; but the consequences of the move are bound to stay."<sup>20</sup> Within a global context, Black people and other people of color are those more likely to lose jobs in local labor markets. They are the ones who lack control over oil, mineral wealth, or other natural resources on their land; who lose their land to global agribusiness; and who are denied basic services of electricity and clean water, let alone the luxury goods of the new information age. The benefits of telecommunications and other new technolo-

gies have had a far greater impact on Whites than on people of African descent and other people of color. For example, though Europe and North America constitute 20 percent of the world's population, two-thirds of all televisions and radios are owned and controlled in these two regions.<sup>21</sup>

The new racism is also characterized by a changing political structure that disenfranchises people, even if they appear to be included. In the United States, for example, people may vote, but corporations and other propertied entities wield tremendous influence in deciding the outcome of elections because they fund campaigns. All levels of government have been affected by a growing concentration of economic power that has fostered corporate influence over public policy. This same process operates in a transnational context. Global corporations increasingly dominate national, regional, and local governance. This concentrated economic power erodes the authority of national governments and has created unprecedented migrations of people and jobs both within and between nation-states. The ineffectiveness of transnational governance and domestic policies of racial desegregation in reducing Black poverty suggests an important link joining the experiences of people of African descent with postcolonial governance and the experiences of African Americans in the United States with racial desegregation. The outcome is reconfigured social hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality, with people of African descent clumped at the bottom. Patterns of desegregation and subsequent resegregation of African Americans in the United States resemble the decolonization and recolonization that characterizes the global context.<sup>22</sup>

The new racism also relies more heavily on mass media to reproduce and disseminate the ideologies needed to justify racism. There are two themes here—the substance of racial ideologies under the new racism and the forms in which ideologies are created, circulated, and resisted. Ideas about Black sexuality certainly appear in contemporary racial ideologies. But the growing significance of Black popular culture and mass media as sites for creating and resisting racial ideologies is also striking. The films, music, magazines, music videos, and television shows of global entertainment, advertising, and news industries that produce superstars like Jennifer Lopez help manufacture the consent that makes the new racism appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable.<sup>23</sup>

The challenges of the new racism have been especially pronounced for African American women and men, the subjects of this book. The issues

associated with the politics of the new racism and with the manipulation of ideologies within them, in the case of African Americans, the discourse on Black sexuality, affect everyone. But the specific form that race and gender politics take for African Americans can serve as an important site for examining these larger issues. Moreover, the African American community contains a crucial subpopulation in these debates. A generation of young African American men and women who were born after the struggles for civil rights, Black power, and African nation-state independence has come of age under this new racism. Referred to as the hip-hop generation, this group has encountered, reproduced, and resisted new forms of racism that continue to rely on ideas about Black sexuality. Expecting a democratic, fair society with equal economic opportunities, instead, this group faced disappearing jobs, crumbling schools, drugs, crime, and the weakening of African American community institutions. The contradictions of the post-civil rights era affect all African Americans, yet they have been especially pronounced for Black youth.<sup>24</sup>

#### **AMERICA—A SEXUALLY REPRESSIVE SOCIETY?**

Sexualized Black bodies seem to be everywhere in contemporary mass media, yet within African American communities, a comprehensive understanding of sexual politics remains elusive. In a social context that routinely depicts men and women of African descent as the embodiment of deviant sexuality, African American politics has remained curiously silent on issues of gender and sexuality. As a result, African Americans lack a vibrant, public discussion of the complex issues that the prevailing discourse on Black sexuality has raised for African American men and women. In more candid moments, however, some African American thinkers stress how damaging the absence of a self-defined Black sexual politics can be. As African American cultural critic Cheryl Clarke pointed out over twenty years ago:

Like all Americans, black Americans live in a sexually repressive culture. And we have made all manner of compromise regarding our sexuality in order to live here. We have expended much energy trying to debunk the racist mythology which says our sexuality is depraved. Unfortunately, many of us have overcompensated and assimilated the



Puritan value that sex is for procreation, occurs only between men and women, and is only valid within the confines of heterosexual marriage. . . . Like everyone else in America who is ambivalent in these respects, black folk have to live with the contradictions of this limited sexual system by repressing or closeting any other sexual/erotic urges, feelings, or desires.<sup>25</sup>

Given the saturation of American mass media with sexual themes, and the visibility of sexualized spectacles that include men and women of African descent within movies, music videos, and popular music in particular, Clarke's comments may seem to be odd. How can American culture be "sexually repressive" when sexuality seems to be everywhere? White actresses routinely play roles that include graphic sex scenes. Moreover, Black women are not downtrodden rape victims, but instead, also seem to be in control of their own sexuality. Director Spike Lee's African American leading lady Nola Darling seemed to be calling the shots in *She's Gotta Have It*, Lee's groundbreaking film about Black female sexuality. Destiny's Child and J-Lo certainly do not seem "repressed." How can African Americans be sexually "closeted" when Black sexuality itself serves as an icon for sexual freedom?

For African Americans, these questions are crucial, especially in the context of the post-civil rights era in which Black popular culture and mass media are increasingly important for racial rule. Sexual regulation occurs through repression, both by eliminating sexual alternatives and by shaping the public debates that do exist. In order to prosper, systems of oppression must regulate sexuality, and they often do so by manufacturing ideologies that render some ideas commonsensical while obscuring others. The expanding scope of mass media makes this process more visible and, more important, in the United States, does seem to have produced a "sexually repressive culture."

The treatment of human sexuality in American society reflects a curious combination of censorship and excessive visibility (e.g., hypervisibility), of embarrassed silences and talk-show babble. On the one hand, since colonial times, selected groups within U.S. society have striven to suppress a wide range of sexual ideas and practices.<sup>26</sup> American colonists paid close attention to the sexual behavior of individuals, not to eliminate sexual expression but to channel it into what they thought was its proper setting and purpose, namely,

as a "duty and a joy within marriage, and for purposes of procreation."<sup>27</sup> More recently, the election of conservative Republican Ronald Reagan in 1980 emboldened the Christian Right to advance a fundamentalist family values discourse. Resembling the colonial discourse from the 1600s, the contemporary family values position argues (1) all sexual practices should occur only within the confines of heterosexual marriage; (2) the fundamental purpose of sexuality is procreation; and (3) children should be protected from all sexual information with the exception of abstinence as the preferred form of birth control before marriage.

This historical and contemporary agenda that has suppressed and often censored a range of ideas concerning human sexuality has made it difficult to have open, candid, and fact-based public debates. This censorship not only affects public dialogues but it also influences research on human sexuality.<sup>28</sup> Heterosexism, with its ideas about what constitutes normal and deviant sexuality holds sway to the point where significant gaps exist in the social science literature on human sexuality. Despite the conservative thrust since 1980, the suppression of a range of ideas about human sexuality is not new. Research done in the 1950s by Alfred Kinsey and his colleagues at Indiana University provides a textbook case of sexual censorship. Kinsey's work treated all sexual practices, including homosexuality and bisexuality, as inherently "normal" and defined the array of sexual practices reported by study participants as benign indicators of human difference. But Kinsey's work virtually ground to a halt when funding for this line of scientific research dried up.

It has taken the field some time to recover from this censorship. In essence, heterosexism and its accompanying assumptions of heterosexuality operate as a hegemonic or taken-for-granted ideology that has influenced research on human sexuality. Societal norms that install heterosexuality as the only way to be normal still hold sway.<sup>29</sup> For example, the term *sexuality* itself is used so synonymously with *heterosexuality* that schools, churches, and other social institutions treat heterosexuality as natural, normal, and inevitable. Studying sexual practices that stray too far from prevailing norms, for example, sex outside of marriage, adolescent sexuality, homosexuality, and formerly taboo sexual practices such as anal and oral sex, become situated within a social problems framework. This approach not only stigmatizes individuals and groups who engage in alternative sexual practices but it also reinforces views of human sexuality itself as being a



problem that should not be discussed in public. Alternately, research on human sexuality is often annexed to bona fide social problems, for example, adolescent pregnancy and people living with HIV/AIDS. Sexuality seems to be everywhere, but research that investigates variations in human sexuality outside of a social problems framework has only recently come to the forefront.

The treatment of sex education in American public schools illustrates how a sexually repressive culture strives to render human sexuality invisible. Sex education remains a hot topic, with students receiving spotty information at best. Topics that are important to adolescents have been difficult to include within sex education programs. Despite high student interest and a growing recognition that comprehensive sex education might save lives, programs tend to shy away from discussing sexuality before marriage, the use of contraception, homosexuality, and other controversial topics. Ironically, the checkered pattern of research on human sexuality offers a good case for how heterosexism operates as a system of power that negatively affects straight and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) students alike. Because adolescents of all sexual orientations are in the process of forming sexual identities, they are especially affected by heterosexism. For example, despite a high adolescent pregnancy rate, worrisome increases in the rate of HIV infection among American adolescents, and emerging research demonstrating that high school students grappling with LGBT identities are more prone to depression and suicide, the reluctance to talk openly about human sexuality within U.S. schools places students at risk. Similarly, a special report on adolescent sexuality points to the difficulties of collecting data on adolescent conceptions of abstinence.<sup>30</sup> Anecdotal reports suggest that many adolescents who engage in oral sex think that they are practicing abstinence because they are refraining from genital sexual intercourse. These practices may protect them from pregnancy, but they also expose adolescents to risks of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV.<sup>31</sup>

Despite these repressive practices, on the other hand, sexual ideas and images within contemporary U.S. society enjoy a visibility that would have been unheard of in Kinsey's 1950s America. Recognizing that sex sells, corporations increasingly use it to sell cars, toothpaste, beer, and other consumer goods. This media saturation has made sexual spectacles highly visible within American popular culture. Soap operas, prime time television,

billboards, music videos, movies, and the Internet all contain explicit sexual material. Making sex highly visible in marketplace commodity relations becomes important to maintaining profitability within the U.S. capitalist political economy. The goal is neither to stimulate debate nor to educate, but to sell products.

In the absence of other forums, talk shows on network television provide one important public medium for gaining sexual information. Unfortunately, such shows foster the commodification of sexuality. Stressing sexually explicit conversations that titillate rather than instruct, talk shows illustrate how marketplace relations profit from sexual spectacles. By the early 2000s, this market had segmented into a variety of shows, each carving out its specific identity, often based on distinctive norms regarding race, class, gender, and sexuality.<sup>32</sup> For example, *The Montel Williams Show* routinely trumpets the benefits of the heterosexual family, primarily by extolling the role of fathers in their children's lives. By itself, this message is fairly innocuous. However, the show's format creates sexual spectacles that function as modern-day morality plays about race, gender, and sexuality. Mr. Williams, an African American, routinely conducts paternity tests for women who are not "sure" who fathered their babies. The potential fathers are invited to hear the results of the paternity test on the air, with a stern talk by Mr. Williams concerning their "responsibility" to those branded as fathers by DNA evidence. This family drama is played out repeatedly, with Mr. Williams readying himself to deliver the message to wayward young men—if you take it out of your pants, you need to take care of your babies. Moreover, as an African American man married to a White woman, on his show Mr. Williams repeatedly brings on working-class, interracial couples in which young White mothers try to get their sexually irresponsible Black boyfriends to claim paternity. If this weren't enough, Mr. Williams also devotes shows to the pain experienced by biracial children in search of their wayward parents.

*The Maury Povich Show* also trades in this racial family drama, but with more emphasis on race and sexuality. Not only does Mr. Povich, a White American, present shows in which White women seek paternity tests for their Black male partners, Mr. Povich presents Black women and Black men in an especially stark light. One show, for example, featured a Black woman who brought on nine Black men as candidates for her six-month-old daughter's "baby daddy."<sup>33</sup> All nine failed the paternity test.

After the revelation, with cameras rolling in search of the all-important “money shot,”<sup>34</sup> Mr. Povich followed the distraught young mother backstage, and volunteered to keep working with her until she had tracked down the Black deadbeat dad. Like Mr. Williams, Mr. Povich delivers a message about responsibility to the DNA-branded fathers. Via the choice of topic, and showing the African American woman whose sexuality was so out of control that she had no idea who had fathered her child, Mr. Povich panders to longstanding societal beliefs about Black sexuality.

The crying and raw emotion solicited on Mr. Williams’s and Mr. Povich’s shows pales in comparison to the staged sexual spectacles of *The Jerry Springer Show*. Reminiscent of the London freak shows of Sarah Bartmann’s time, Mr. Springer’s shows routinely combine sexuality and violence, two sure-fire audience builders. Here participants are invited to come on the air and reveal “secrets” to seemingly unsuspecting spouses, lovers, and friends. The “secrets” routinely involve cheating, lying, and false paternity. By his choice of guests, Mr. Springer’s show also takes sexual spectacles to an entirely new level. Morbidly obese women parade across the stage in bikinis, verbally taunting the audience to comment on their appearance. In a context in which women’s bodies are routinely sexualized, displaying seemingly hideous female bodies is designed to shock and solicit ridicule. These confessional talk shows also routinely conduct paternity tests, show pictures of babies who lack legal fathers, discuss sexual infidelity, and display audience members in sexually explicit clothing (or lack thereof). For many Americans, these shows substitute for public discussions of sexuality because few other outlets are available.

African Americans are well represented in the public spectacles provided by Mr. Williams’s, Mr. Povich’s, and Mr. Springer’s talk shows. Guests on all three programs are clearly working-class, with many of them Black and Latino. These shows are not just about sexuality; they also signal clear messages about race and class. They depict the challenges of explaining a new, interracial class structure that can no longer rely on biological notions of race to differentiate poor people (assumed to be Black) from middle-class people (assumed to be White). In the new multicultural America, Blacks can be middle class (the hugely popular *Cosby Show* broke that barrier in the 1980s) and, in fact, a certain degree of Black middle-class visibility is needed to buttress arguments of equal opportunity (Oprah Winfrey and Montel Williams both exemplify this need for visible,

accomplished Blacks). But how does one explain the persistence of poverty among *White* Americans if poverty has long been attributed to Black biological inferiority? They are not biologically Black, but their poverty and downward mobility can be explained if they are seen as being culturally or socially Black. Whites who embrace Black culture become positioned closer to Blacks and become stigmatized. In the context of the new racism, cultural explanations for economic success and poverty substitute for biological arguments concerning intelligence or genetic dispositions for immorality or violence.

Viewing stories about historically taboo interracial sexuality between White women and Black men becomes the new sexual spectacle, where working-class White women become “darkened” by their sexual relationships with irresponsible working-class Black men.<sup>35</sup> When accused of paternity by these “trashy” White women, Black men are depicted as proud of their irresponsible sexual behavior. Certainly White men are given paternity tests on these shows, but typically these are working-class or poor White men who are hauled in by working-class White mothers of their alleged children. In contrast to the White women who point the finger of paternity at both Black and White men, Black women rarely identify White men as the potential fathers of their babies. Given the history of interracial, institutionalized rape of Black women by White men, White fathers of Black children would hardly be newsworthy. Instead, Black women are presented as being so reckless that they do not know who fathered their children or, sharing a common fate with their White sisters, they point the finger at irresponsible Black men. Despite similarities that link all three shows, they do offer different scripts for solving the problems of these sexual spectacles. Part of the appeal of *The Montel Williams Show* lies in his role in this family drama—Williams plays the part of the caring yet stern Black patriarch who provides the fatherly discipline that so many of his guests seemingly lack. In contrast, Mr. Povich presents himself as a kindly White father, showing concern for his emotional albeit abnormal guests. Mr. Springer is merely a ringmaster—he doesn’t get near his guests, preferring instead to watch the cursing and chair throwing from a safe distance. Discipline them, listen to them, or dismiss them—all three solutions apply to working-class and poor guests. Apparently, middle-class Americans (even Black ones) have little difficulty identifying which sexual partner conceived their children. Affluent, thirty-something White women

awaiting the results of paternity tests for their biracial babies just do not appear on any of these shows.

Much more is at stake here than the accuracy of the depictions of African American women and men within talk shows and other forms of mass media. African Americans and Black culture are highly visible within the American movies, music, sports, dance, and fashion that help shape contemporary ideologies of race, gender, sexuality, and class in a global context. Sexual spectacles travel, and they matter. Historical context disappears, leaving seemingly free-floating images in its wake that become the new vocabulary that joins quite disparate entities. Terms such as “primitive,” “backward,” “jungle,” “wild,” and “freak” uncritically cycle through contemporary global culture, leaving undisturbed the pejorative historical meanings associated with this vocabulary. But history hides in the shadows of these terms, because these concepts are incomprehensible without a social context to give them meaning. For example, the pervasive use of animal imagery persists within some expressions of contemporary Black popular culture, as suggested by the decision to clothe Destiny’s Child in animal-skin bikinis on their album cover. These depictions eerily resemble past practices of associating Africans with animals, particularly apes, monkeys, and chimpanzees. The choice of animal may change—no longer apes, Black men have taken on new identities as “dogs” energetically engaged in chasing the (kitty) “cat”—but associating Black men and women with lusty, animal sexual practices apparently has not. Although different meanings may be associated with animal imagery, Snoop Doggy Dog, Little Bow Wow, and the classic phrase “you my main dog” all invoke this same universe of animal imagery. Moreover, representations of Black men as “dogs” who have replaced the cool “cats” of prior eras of African American jazzmen, as well as the video “hos” who populate rap music videos suggest the emergence of an increasingly sophisticated gender-specific expression of ideas about Blackness sold in the global marketplace. Josephine Baker’s banana dance and Destiny’s Child’s “bootylicious” would be meaningless without this history, even if those enjoying the images do not consciously see the connections.

African American theorist Cornel West identifies the paradox of a sexually repressive culture that, on the one hand, seems saturated with sexuality, but that, on the other hand, suppresses education and open dialogue concerning human sexuality. To West, race matters: “the paradox of the

sexual politics of race in America is that, behind closed doors, the dirty, disgusting, and funky sex associated with Black people is often perceived to be more intriguing and interesting, while in public spaces talk about Black sexuality is virtually taboo.”<sup>36</sup> Black sexuality is routinely invoked within American society, namely, the alleged sexual prowess of the Black men accused of fathering babies with White women, but analyzing it is discouraged. The result is a society fraught with contradictions. For example, well-off White teenagers can drive expensive cars to racially segregated high schools and college campuses that admit only a few handpicked African Americans, all the while booming the latest sexually explicit lyrics of their favorite Black hip-hop artist. American viewers can sit in their living rooms viewing talk shows that censure the African American man accused of fathering three out-of-wedlock children with two different White women, yet still be intrigued by his sexual prowess. Legions of young American men can wonder what it would be like to get Beyoncé Knowles from Destiny’s Child or Jennifer Lopez in bed.

Like other Americans, African Americans must make sense of this curious sexual climate that accompanies the new racism. This task is made even more difficult by the fact that African Americans are included in these debates, often serving as examples of what *not* to be or, alternately, as icons of sexual freedom served up as the antidote to American sexual repression. As part of the color-blind racism that has accompanied the erasure of the color line, the ubiquitous inclusion of images of Black sexuality that permeate contemporary movies, television shows, and music videos can replicate the power relations of racism today just as effectively as the exclusion of Black images did prior to the 1960s. Thus, Cheryl Clarke’s observation that African Americans live in a sexually repressive culture speaks less to the prominence of representations of Black sexuality within an increasingly powerful mass media than to the *function* of these images in helping to construct a “limited sexual system.”

### GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND AFRICAN AMERICAN POLITICS

African Americans typically think that gender relations are a private concern, mainly reflecting the love relationships between heterosexual men and women. Those who see the harmful effects of gender oppression on African Americans still wish to define issues of gender and sexuality solely

within the context of Black community politics, a domestic issue among Black people. Place the "public" issue of race first, they counsel, and leave the more "private" issues of gender and sexuality for us to work out among ourselves. Relying on ideas about family to construct ideas about race, this approach sees African Americans as participating in a large, imagined racial family. In service to the race, each individual African American should put on a good face for the critical White public that sits in judgment outside African American communities. The adage "don't air dirty laundry in public" speaks to this African American community norm of keeping these and other family problems hidden.<sup>37</sup>

What these approaches fail to grasp is that commonsense notions about differences of gender and sexuality that allegedly distinguish Whites (carriers of "normal" gender ideology and sexual practices) from Blacks (carriers of "deviant" gender ideology and sexual practices) have long served as the fulcrum for constructing racial difference. Within white/black binary thinking, ideas about racial normality and deviancy draw heavily upon ideas about gender and sexuality for meaning. Moreover, because racial normality has been defined in gender-specific terms, African American progress or lack thereof in achieving the gender norms attributed to Whites has long been used as a marker of racial progress. Stated differently, African Americans have been evaluated within the context of a sex role theory that by its very nature disadvantages Black people.<sup>38</sup> Within a Western sex role ideology premised on ideas of strong men and weak women, on active, virile masculinity and passive, dependent femininity, the seeming role reversal among African Americans has been used to stigmatize Black people.<sup>39</sup> This ideology not only identifies a reversed, damaged gender ideology as a sign of racial difference, it further claims that flawed ideas concerning Black masculinity and Black femininity reflect equally problematic conceptions of sexuality.

Because African Americans are in many ways quintessentially American, individual African Americans as well as African Americans as a collectivity can have just as much difficulty as everyone else in understanding these broader U.S. sexual politics. But, because African Americans have historically been harmed by these contradictory sexual politics, the stakes are much higher to develop a critical consciousness. The refusal to discuss *in public* the profound influence of Western constructions of a deviant Black sexuality on African American men and women leaves a vacuum in contemporary African

American politics. Major Black civil rights organizations, for example, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Urban League continue to skirt issues associated with gender and sexuality.<sup>40</sup> Black Christian churches constitute the most important African American community organizations, and yet they continue to preach a conservative gender ideology, and shun controversial topics, especially sexuality.<sup>41</sup> Gender politics that deny African American women the pulpit when close to 70 percent of churchgoing members are female speak to the need for engagement on these issues. Louis Farrakhan, the head of the Nation of Islam (NOI), called a very successful Million Man March on Washington, D.C. in 1995, yet the NOI's gender politics are grounded in the bedrock of the patriarchal nuclear family and, in many ways, are indistinguishable from those of mainstream Black Christian denominations as well as the sexually repressive culture discussed earlier.<sup>42</sup>

African American politics of the post-civil rights era seems to be between a rock and a hard place. Racial segregation as the legal mechanism for racial oppression has been struck down and the racial ideologies that justified it have been forcefully challenged. Few would offer biological explanations for African American joblessness, poor school performance, higher rates of pregnancy out of wedlock, and higher rates of incarceration. But the changing legal climate and the muting of racial theories rooted in biology neither means that new forms of racism are absent nor that cultural arguments are replacing biology as the reason given for African American disadvantage.<sup>43</sup>

This new racism does present some formidable puzzles for African American politics. In prior periods in which biological theories were used to justify racist practices, racism and antiracism had a seemingly organic and oppositional relationship. One could either be *for* racism by believing that Blacks were biologically inferior and deserved the treatment that they received or one could be *against* it by rejecting these beliefs and pointing to racial prejudice and institutional discrimination as more important in explaining Black disadvantage. These distinctions no longer hold for many White and Black Americans. Under the new color-blind racism that erases the color line, racism itself seems to have disappeared. As French sociologist Michel Wieviorka points out, "this clear-cut polarity between racists and anti-racists no longer exists."<sup>44</sup> With the exception of largely discredited right-wing groups, few American organizations openly advocate theo-

ries of Black inferiority based on outdated racial biology. As a result, groups holding vastly different perspectives on what constitutes antiracist political activism can claim that they are the true antiracists.

Taking Martin Luther King, Jr.'s advice to heart that "people should be judged by the content of their character, and not by the color of their skin," for example, one group believes that treating everyone the same, regardless of color, moves American society toward equality. Within this assimilationist, color-blind version of antiracism, recognizing racial differences, or, in some versions, even using the term *race*, fosters racism. In contrast, another group argues that recognizing racial differences is an essential first step in unpacking racial meanings that continue to shape social relations. They see a color-conscious, multicultural diversity as the future of American democracy. Ironically, individuals and groups holding these disparate views can now accuse one another of perpetuating racism itself.<sup>45</sup> Both appropriate the symbols of the civil rights and Black power movements for their own ends. In this context, it becomes possible for conservative Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas and Black Nationalist filmmaker Spike Lee *both* to admire and to claim the legacy of Malcolm X. If all of the actual racists in the United States have curiously disappeared, it becomes much more difficult to argue that racism persists. After all, if George W. Bush, Louis Farrakhan, Bill Clinton, Colin Powell, and Molefi Asante can all claim the mantle of being antiracists, how does one recognize racism?<sup>46</sup>

African American politics is buffeted by the same trends that afflict antiracist practices overall. In the context of new U.S. racial formations and of conflicting approaches to Black empowerment and social justice, African American antiracist politics seems stuck between two ineffective ideological options. On one side stands a threadbare civil rights agenda that continues to preach racial integration to an African American population so incarcerated in extensive inner-city ghettos that few Whites are left to integrate schools, neighborhoods, and public facilities.<sup>47</sup> Whites have voted with their feet and their pocketbooks, and few attend the annual Martin Luther King Day rally anymore. On the other side stands a largely symbolic Black Nationalist agenda that shapes the gender politics of controversial organizations such as the Nation of Islam. Black nationalist ideology also appears as a faux radical politics in some hip-hop culture, for example, in the work of Public Enemy or Ice T, primarily because African American youth quite

rightly perceive few other options. Neither choice has been especially effective in addressing the social problems of the inner cities or in fostering a broader social justice agenda within the United States.

Black Americans must figure out how to deal with the contours of the new racism and must do so with an increased sensitivity to issues of gender and sexuality. In this regard, political theorist Cathy J. Cohen's schema of consensus and crosscutting political issues provides a useful model for understanding current African American antiracist politics. Consensus issues affect all identifiable group members, in this case, all who claim or are assigned a Black identity. Consensus issues may affect all group members, but they may not take the same form for all group members. In contrast, crosscutting issues disproportionately and directly affect only certain segments of a group. Cohen suggests that current African American politics treat race as a consensus issue while assigning gender and sexuality a secondary status as crosscutting issues. Within this thinking, Black women are affected by gender and Black men are not, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered Black people are affected by sexuality and heterosexual Blacks are not.

The new social relations of the post-civil rights era mandate new understandings of how race, class, gender, and sexuality operate as consensus and crosscutting issues within African American politics and how they might be differently configured for what lies ahead. Race continues to be a compelling consensus issue for African Americans because the vast majority of Blacks are either directly affected by racial discrimination or know someone who is or has been affected. For most, middle-class Black achievement is only one generation away from the racism of the past, and its effects are still felt. This racial consensus has political effects in that African American voting behavior demonstrates a commitment to racial solidarity. Despite the growth of a new Black middle class, African Americans are more likely to vote as a racial bloc than they are to vote their social class interests.<sup>48</sup> Claims from William Julius Wilson notwithstanding,<sup>49</sup> most African Americans recognize that class differences among African Americans are now more pronounced. But when it comes to electoral politics, they continue to choose race over class, that is, when they perceive that they have a choice at all.

Both gender and sexuality have historically been crosscutting issues within the framework of an overarching antiracist political project. This has



been a problem because, within Black political arenas, crosscutting issues are often deemed to be secondary to the greater good of the group.<sup>50</sup> In a context in which gender has been associated with Black women and in which sexuality has been the province of Black (LGBT) people, these groups have often been encouraged to take a back seat for the greater good of racial solidarity. Many have not gone willingly. The explosion of Black feminism since the 1970s has been spurred on, in large part, by the refusal of Black women activists to take a back seat to men within both the civil rights and the Black Nationalist political movements. Similar catalysts stimulated the increasing visibility of Black lesbians and gays. These groups point out that, without serious attention to contemporary Black sexual politics, African Americans may uncritically circulate ideas about race, class, gender, and sexuality that bear striking resemblance to those long advanced by White elites.

An antiracist politics that does not reframe the consensus issue of race in terms of class, gender, sexuality, and age will remain incapable of responding to the complexities of the new racism. Take, for example, the pressing issue of violence that confronts people of African descent. African Americans are all affected by violence, but by different manifestations. Regardless of social class, Black men are more likely to encounter state-sanctioned violence at the hands of police whereas Black women are more likely to experience intimate violence of battering and rape at the hands of fathers, brothers, spouses, boyfriends, and men in their neighborhoods. Black youth and children witness this violence and are profoundly affected by it. Black LGBT people encounter hate crimes of verbal and physical harassment that stem from homophobia. Young Black men often kill one another, a form of internecine violence that reflects the significance of age. Poor and working-class Black people are more vulnerable to certain types of violence than their more affluent counterparts. Violence represents a potentially divisive issue if one form of violence is deemed to be more important than others because the segment of Black people who experience it are deemed more worthy of attention and help. Rather than viewing violence as a crosscutting issue, each group member would recognize the importance of all forms of antiviolence political action, even if particular forms of violence, for example, police harassment or wife battering or rape, did not directly affect him or her.

The issue for African American political agendas is to see the interconnectedness of consensus and crosscutting issues in crafting African

American political agendas. Gender, sexuality, class, and age need not be crosscutting issues within the consensus issue of race but instead are crucial for developing effective racial politics. As the discussion of crafting antiviolence initiatives suggests, the real consensus issue is how to keep race, class, gender, sexuality, and age in dialogue with one another in crafting an antiracist African American politics. Not only are gender, sexuality, and class critical for internal African American politics, developing a more complex analysis creates possibilities for coalitions with other groups who are engaged in similar social justice projects. For example, African Americans cannot address violence alone because the violence against Black women also affects women in a global context. The forms of state violence that concern African American men also affect Latino men and poor and working-class White American men. State violence is not unique to the United States, as numerous cases of state-sanctioned violence in Central and South America and in Africa, Eastern Europe, and Asia suggest. The environmental justice movement pays attention to violence against children from dumping, pesticides, and pollution. These are all broad-based social justice projects, and a robust Black politics would be prepared to engage in coalitions such as these.

Given these challenges, it is vital that the notion of antiracist politics be expanded beyond more traditional notions of political parties, social movements, and grassroots political organizations. Political anthropologist James C. Scott uses the term "infrapolitics" to describe the hidden behaviors of everyday resistance. Despite appearances of consent, people challenge inequalities of race, class, gender, and sexuality through conversations, jokes, songs, folklore, theft, foot-dragging, and a multitude of everyday behaviors.<sup>51</sup> As African American historian Robin D. G. Kelley points out, "the political history of oppressed people cannot be understood without reference to infrapolitics, for these daily acts have a cumulative effect on power relations."<sup>52</sup> Everyday life contains many opportunities for resistance, if individual thoughts and actions can be conceptualized in this fashion. Infrapolitics provide important insights concerning the political possibilities for oppressed groups that seemingly lack political options. For example, within African American communities, men and women have different degrees of access to formal power. Men are more likely to engage in traditional politics of officeholding whereas women have been more involved in the day-to-day infrapolitics of community organizing.

Moreover, because infrapolitics and traditional politics are interdependent, neither is sufficient as the sole form of political resistance.

In a new global context, both the organizational politics of formal political arenas and the infrapolitics of everyday African American life are ground zero for issues that go far beyond the happenings in Black inner-city neighborhoods, city politics, or within the United States itself. Given the visibility of African Americans within a global popular culture, African American reactions to these new social relations are highly important. In mapping Black responses to the new racism with an eye toward developing a progressive Black sexual politics adequate for broader antiracist initiatives, African Americans respond in often contradictory ways. Twenty years ago, Cheryl Clarke saw silences and self-censorship. Now, however, these silences are being supplemented by growing numbers of African American men and women who seem ever ready to replicate these images in full public view. Discourses such as the references to Jennifer Lopez's butt sell because they allude to a certain kind of sexuality long associated with people of African descent. Seemingly unaware of this history, or perhaps exploiting it, some African American artists capitalize on a situation in which everyone knows on some level what gives ideas about Black sexuality their meaning but no one is ultimately responsible. It's one thing if Jennifer Lopez and Beyoncé Knowles from Destiny's Child profit from their own images and present themselves in performance as "bootylicious." It's entirely another if adolescent girls tap into this message of female power and head off to their eighth grade classrooms decked in the same "bootylicious" apparel, all the while purchasing the clothes required to achieve this image with money they don't have. The theme here is not censorship of Black girls, but rather to question whether they can "handle it" if they are so woefully uninformed about the legacy of Sarah Bartmann.

Contemporary forms of oppression do not routinely force people to submit. Instead, they manufacture consent for domination so that we lose our ability to question and thus collude in our own subordination. Images of J-Lo, Destiny's Child, and Montel Williams are all part of this process of reproduction and contestation. In this context of oppressions occurring through the normal structures of society, within contemporary nation-states such as the United States, oppression becomes expressed as a routinized violence or normalized war within one society. Within the United States, oppression now takes a new form, one where society itself is satu-

rated with the relations of warfare against selected members of society itself. Routinized violence can break through into open conflict (1992 in Los Angeles and 2001 in Cincinnati), but more often, this normalized war also operates through the infrapolitics of everyday life, through a series of mini-assaults that convince each one of us to stay in our place.<sup>53</sup> Black people are under assault, and the racial and gender meanings assigned to Black bodies as well as the social meanings of Black sexuality in American society overall constitute sites of contestation in an uncivil civil war against Black people.

### DEVELOPING A PROGRESSIVE BLACK SEXUAL POLITICS

African Americans express quite diverse and often contradictory responses to the challenges raised by prevailing Black sexual politics. How can Jennifer Lopez and Destiny's Child be independent women and bootylicious at the same time? If Sarah Bartmann, Josephine Baker, Destiny's Child, and Jennifer Lopez can be convinced to perceive themselves solely in terms of the value of their bootys in marketplace relations, then oppression may be complete. If African American men accept the images of themselves as sexually irresponsible boys as depicted on the Montel Williams, Maury Povich, and Jerry Springer shows, then they too participate in structuring their own oppression. But is anyone ever without agency to this degree?

The antidote to a gender-specific racial oppression that advances controlling images of deviant Black sexuality does not lie in embracing a conservative politics of respectability that mimics the beliefs of those responsible for the sexually repressive culture in the first place. Rather, in the context of a new racism, men and women who rescue and redefine sexuality as a source of power rooted in spirituality, expressiveness, and love can craft new understandings of Black masculinity and Black femininity needed for a progressive Black sexual politics. When reclaimed by individuals and groups, redefined ideas about sexuality and sexual practices can operate as sources of joy, pleasure, and empowerment that simultaneously affirm and transcend individual sexual pleasure for social good.

Black feminist poet Audre Lorde certainly knew this when, almost thirty years ago, she identified the power of the erotic as an important source of energy for resisting gender oppression.<sup>54</sup> Lorde redefined the



erotic as the deep feelings within each of us in search of love, affirmation, recognition, and a spiritual and/or physical connection to one another. Lorde argued that impoverished notions of love of self and others lie at the heart of oppression. Reclaiming the erotic as a domain of exploration, pleasure, and human agency is thus vital to individual empowerment. Lorde associated erotic power with women and with female sexuality. But the power of the erotic need not be reserved for women, nor is it synonymous with physical sexual expression. Such power is available to all human beings.

For women and men alike, and for individuals from diverse racial, ethnic, sexual, age, and national backgrounds, claiming such power remains easier said than done. Expressing individual agency and challenging the Black sexual politics that shape everyday life is complicated; linking the *individual* agency expressed in these social locations to a *collective* group politics may seem unattainable. The dialectical relationship between oppression and activism makes all politics difficult, including this one. A fundamental contradiction lies at the juncture where intersecting oppressions grounded in dominance confront a resistance nourished by expansive notions of care, eroticism, spirituality, and politicized love. On the one hand, perverting the power of the erotic by manipulating ideas about sexuality has been and continues to be an important dimension of oppressions of race, gender, class, and sexuality. For African Americans, these manipulations take myriad forms and continue to affect contemporary Black sexual politics. On the other hand, because deeply held feelings, especially those that have bodily expression, constitute one of the most important sources of energy available to human beings, people who are able to reclaim the power of the erotic gain a crucial weapon in resisting these intersecting oppressions. Despite these challenges, for African Americans, the struggle is essential.