Chapter Four

Sexual Tensions

and you white girl
shall I call you sister now?
Can we share any secrets of sameness,
any singularity of goals . . .

you white girl
i am yet suspicious of/
for deep inside of me
there is the still belief that
i am
a road
you would travel
to my man.

-Carolyn M. Rodgers
"I Have Been Hungry," 1976

I was made to feel that I had committed some sort of unspoken crime against the black community, particularly black women.

- Gail Mathabane, White co-author
(with Black husband, Mark Mathabane)
of Love in Black and White:
The Triumph of Love Over Prejudice and Taboo, 1993

A few years ago, Jackie, an attractive, light-skinned African American woman from Chicago, and her Black boyfriend, Kevin, traveled together to Atlanta to visit his relatives and friends. Having lived all her life in the North, Jackie found the South an unwelcome and even frightening place. "The farther south we went," she said, "the more hostility I encountered." Ironically, the hostility she felt came not from Southern Whites, but from other Black women. Jackie's skin is so fair and her features are so Caucasian-looking that others often other Blacks don't immediately recognize her racial identity. Jackie found herself accused of being White and "stealing" an available Black man. Although she had encountered this kind of reaction before, never had it been manifested with such intensity and rage. On more than one occasion Kevin had to come to her rescue, telling the others, "Be cool, now. She's a sister like you." As the two headed back home, Jackie told her boyfriend, "You know, Kevin, if looks could kill, I would be long gone."

Interracial sexual jealousy remains a flashpoint between women of African and European descent in this country. Fueled by a history of racial antagonism, especially in the South, and sustained by the current shortage of Black men, it is a jealousy so intense that it can destroy women's natural alliances. Women would rather blame each other for their sexual abuse than confront the men of their own race who date and marry interracially.

Yet, paradoxically, interracial sexual relationships are also a tremendous source of connection between women of the two races. Heterosexual women who love men of another race may develop strong attachments with their companions' mothers, sisters, and female friends. Among White and Black lesbians who cross the color line, especially intense bonds of love and companionship are frequently formed. Regardless of sexual orientation, interracial love can be a bridge between women of different races.

In this chapter we look at the ways in which matters of the heart and flesh define White and Black women's interpersonal relationships. We begin by identifying various racial myths regarding Black and White women's sexuality and how these myths serve White and Black men. From there, we look at new research on women's sexuality, and how findings, particularly among adolescents, are often distorted by class bias. Next, the floodgate of raw emotions surrounding interracial sexual relationships is opened. Finally, we turn to the role race plays in women's sexual abuse and exploitation, from rape to pornography.

Myths and Realities

One myth regarding female sexuality has to do with African women's "animalistic sexuality," a myth created to rationalize the breeding and selling of slaves for profit and to justify the sexual exploitation of female slaves. The myth made it easier for White owners to think of their slaves as animals, rather than as human beings with family ties and the capacity to love.

Another source of myth about African American women's sexuality was White reaction to Black women's more rhythmic bodily movements. African women, even when strolling casually from one place to another, often had a way of gently swaying their hips. In Europe, good Christian women were carefully taught not to swivel their hips or in any way emphasize their sexuality. Within Christian cultures in general, rhythmic body movements of any sort were associated with sex, and thus ultimately linked to sin. But in Africa, rhythm
and dance were, and continue to be, central to expressions of spirituality and freedom.

White European-based society found it difficult to accept that other cultures might have standards of behavior different from their own. In Europe, women's breasts were carefully concealed and far more sexualized than in Africa. To African women, exposing one's breasts was natural. Not only was it easier for them to feed their children, but it was also more comfortable in hot weather. Thus, to African men, nude breasts were simply part of the cultural landscape, more functional than erotic. But to White men, unaccustomed to such casual nudity, bare-breasted women were a sign of heightened sexuality, and imaginations ran wild.

Even the differences in the body shape and size between European women and African American women were used to divide them. Between 1810 and 1815, preoccupation with the perceived differences in buttock size reached a nadir when the naked body of a Black South African woman named Saartjie (known as Sarah Bartmann) was put on display in London and Paris, naked, like an animal. She was called "the Hottentot Venus," and her protruding buttocks and "unique" genitalia were exhibited as proof that Black women were more primitive and animalistic in their sexuality than White women. Scientists of the era pointed to evolution to account for this so-called structural difference, claiming that African women's buttocks were protectively raised higher and angled forward as an effective way to keep their genitalia above and away from the high grasses through which they ran. In looking back on the misguided and racist notions from an earlier century, however, it's important to note that differences between two groups are rarely equal, but instead become proof of one's racial superiority or inferiority.

These damaging myths of centuries past persist to this day. For African American women whose ancestors were psychologically scarred and physically terrorized, there is a collective consciousness of shared survival around issues of their sexuality. White women in this country, obviously, do not share this history. This is not to say, however, that they too weren't harmed by the myth-making of an earlier time.

When America was first settled, European culture in general, and Christianity in particular, severely penalized and repressed female expressions of sexuality. According to the dictates of Victorian morality, White women were expected to feign a total lack of interest in matters of the flesh, except as a means to have children. In polite society, White women were never free to be seductive or to act passionate with the men they loved. That a Black woman could, at least in theory, cause White women alternately to envy and to feel threatened by her. In the end, these sexual myths, perpetuated and abetted by White men, had the effect of driving apart the women of the two races. Instead of confronting the men who had sexual relations with their slave women, Southern White women found it more expedient to blame "hypersexual" Black women for seducing "innocent" White men. Jessie Daniel Ames, a co-founder of the biracial Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching, said, in 1936:

White men have said over and over -- and we believed it because it was repeated so often—that not only was there no such thing as a chaste Negro woman -- but that a Negro woman could not be assaulted, that it was never against her will.

These attitudes continue to haunt our culture today, dividing White women from Black, distinguishing "good" girls from "bad." In an article about the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill hearings, African American legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw describes how sexualized images of race continue to make women into either madonnas or whores. White women are assumed to be good and pure until proven otherwise, but Black women, simply because they are Black, are assumed to be bad and whore-like. Even for an African American woman like Hill, who was a law professor at a prestigious university and a Baptist Sunday school teacher, the onus is on her to prove herself virtuous. Because of this difference in the presumed sexual natures of African American women and White women, White and Black women, Crenshaw maintains, experience differently the oppressive power of the madonna-whore dichotomy.

While White men have done much to perpetuate stereotypes about the sexuality of White women and Black women, African American men also make claims that divide White women from Black. What Black woman hasn't been told by a Black man that White women are more sexually liberated, more open to trying different sexual positions, more willing to give oral sex, and less demanding of a commitment to keep their genitalia above and away from the high grasses through which they ran. In stirring up a hornet's nest of interracial sexual jealousy, Black men gain the advantage. Dividing women sexually helps men also make claims that divide White women from Black. What Black woman hasn't been told by a Black man that White women are more sexually liberated, more open to trying different sexual positions, more willing to give oral sex, and less demanding of a commitment to keep their genitalia above and away from the high grasses through which they ran. In looking back on the misguided and racist notions from an earlier century, however, it's important to note that differences between two groups are rarely equal, but instead become proof of one's racial superiority or inferiority.

Ultimately, these damaging myths serve the interests of those with greater relative power, whether Whites in relation to Blacks or men in relation to women. Ironically, even myths about African American men's greater sexual prowess and larger penis size say less about Black men than about ensuring the separation of Black men and White women; such myths are designed to frighten White women and discourage them from pursuing African American men. It is hard to imagine men of either race claiming that "their" women are better in bed than women of the other race; such claims would serve the men no purpose. In alleging that women of the other race are sexually superior, however, men of both races are able to justify their cross-race pursuits while, at the same time, undermining the self-esteem and social stature of women of their own race.

Finally, race-based myths have the effect of silencing women so that they never talk to each about sex. This conspiracy of silence adds to an atmosphere of racial disharmony and distrust. Some people, in fact, speculate that sexual insecurity is the real basis for the continuing racial tension in this country.

How different are the sexual attitudes and practices of White women and Black women in reality? Research shows that, in fact, there are
many more areas of similarity than of difference. In 1985, psychologist Philip Belcastro surveyed a racially mixed sample of a thousand unmarried undergraduates at a large Midwestern university. He found that Black and White women had roughly equal rates of premarital intercourse, intercourse with a stranger, abortion, intercourse frequency, number of intercourse partners, use of diaphragms, and percentages of pregnancies. The few areas of difference Belcastro observed suggest that White college women are more sexually active and varied in their activities than Black college women. On average, White women had more intercourse partners for six months or longer, and were more likely to perform fellatio and masturbate a partner to orgasm than were Black women. Belcastro's study has been criticized, however, because he did not control for socioeconomic differences in the women he surveyed. By using only college students, who tend to be more affluent than their counterparts in general, he limited his findings in terms of what they say about the population at large.

Another major study, conducted by Gail Wyatt, an African American psychology professor in the Department of Psychiatric and Biobehavioral Sciences at UCLA, balanced White and Black women in the study by income level and education. Wyatt also used what is generally considered a more reliable research method, conducting personal interviews with the participants. For three years, she and her team interviewed 126 African American women and 122 White women in the Los Angeles area. Her findings, published in 1989, indicate a great deal of similarity in the sexual practices and attitudes of the women. And like Belcastro, she observed some differences. Before the age of eighteen, 69 percent of White women, compared with only 31 percent of Black women, report having had four to seven one-night stands. Between the ages of eighteen and thirty-six, White women continued to have more sexual partners. Seventy-four percent had thirteen or more sexual partners, while only 26 percent of African American women reported having this many. Wyatt also found race differences in women who had oral sex or who masturbated. Among White women, 93 percent reported that they had experienced cunnilingus, and the same percent said that they had also performed fellatio. But among Black women, only 55 percent said that they had experienced cunnilingus, and 65 percent said that they had fellated. Finally, the White women in the study reported that they masturbated more frequently than Black women did.

Both Wyatt's research and Belcastro's further support the findings of a sex survey recently published by the Battelle Human Affairs Research Center, in Seattle, refuting the notion that African American women are more promiscuous than White women. In fact, White women have more sexual partners during their lifetime and are more varied in their sexual activities. As African American sociologist Robert Staples summed up, "The most popular myth is that Black sexuality has always been . . . unrestrained and unrestricted, but in reality Blacks are very conservative."

The belief that African American females are more sexually active than White females stems largely from the media's emphasis on African Americans who are poor. What is often thought to be a race difference in this country is, in reality, a class difference. Nowhere is this more true than in the presumed rates of early sexual activity of White and Black teenage girls.

According to Wyatt, White and Black girls of the same socioeconomic background have their first sexual experiences at roughly the same age, around sixteen. But when class is not factored in, national studies indicate that African American teenage girls, proportionately more of whom are poor, experience intercourse, on the average, two years ahead of White teenage girls, proportionately more of whom are affluent. Thus, between the ages of fifteen through nineteen, African American teenage girls, overall, have a rate of sexual intercourse twice that of White teenage girls. Even this gap is rapidly closing, however. A recent study by the Centers for Disease Control reveals that the sexual activity of Black teenagers has now leveled off, while the rate for White teenage girls continues to climb. By the age of nineteen, roughly 80 percent of the women in both groups have had sexual intercourse.

There are several factors associated with class that encourage early sexual involvement. Poor children do less well in school, and poor academic performance is itself a predictor of early sexual activity. There is also a connection between obesity and sexual maturity, as we noted earlier. All other things being equal, obese children, proportionately more of whom are Black, mature faster than children of normal weight. And early sexual maturity is associated with early sexual experimentation. Those who are more developed are granted more freedom by their parents and are allowed to associate more with older friends than those who are less physically mature. Both of these factors heighten the chances of early sexual involvement. There is even some evidence that certain events in a child's life can actually trigger early sexual development and experimentation. According to sociobiologist and psychologist Jay Belsky, of Pennsylvania State University, when a father is chronically absent or sexually abusive, a biologically based survival mechanism kicks in, increasing hormone production and early sexual maturity, thereby helping daughters more quickly to escape the distressing situation.

Sexually active Black teenage girls are not necessarily having more "fun" than their sexually active White counterparts, however. A two-year longitudinal study by Edward Smith and J. Richard Udry, published in 1985, examined patterns of teenagers' sexual behavior and revealed some interesting race differences. The researchers found that White girls tend to move much more slowly from necking to clothed petting to unclothed petting and finally to intercourse than do African American girls, whose only activity before intercourse is oftentimes necking. Because women, in general, are aroused more slowly than men, the more rapidly a male moves to intercourse, the less likely his partner will experience orgasm. Sexologists further observe that prolonged petting leads to greater sexual satisfaction in women. In fact, what is commonly referred to as "foreplay" by both men and women is actually "the play" for women, many of whom report that they experienced more orgasms when they were only petting, before intercourse began.

During this prolonged petting stage, White women also learn more varied sexual activities. That is, as White girls seek to delay losing their virginity, and "do everything else but," they gain the skills to masturbate a partner to orgasm, to give and receive oral sex, as well as to discover what should be done to them to satisfy their own sexual desires.

In a 1994 Essence article entitled "Am I the Last Virgin?" the twenty-four-year-old African American Tara Roberts discusses her rushed sexual experiences with Black men, bemoaning the near absence of gentle touching and prolonged foreplay. Roberts describes the one time she came closest to having intercourse with a "Zimbabwean brother":

http://condor.depaul.edu/~mwilson/divided/chptfour.htm
We rushed back to his place and with little foreplay, he whipped it out and went straight for the gusto. I tried to slow him down.
"Hey," I said softly, "I'm here." I searched for his soul in those beautiful eyes and confirmed for both of us that I wasn't going anywhere. I tried touching and exploring him, hoping he would understand that we had all night under that magical Zimbabwean sky. But soon, without touching my body at all, he was ready again.

Roberts goes on, "My dream lover has to know that sex is more than just a pounding on the pelvis or an act that ends with the release of his semen."

White psychologist Michelle Fine finds that neither Black nor White teenage girls are allowed to experience their sexual nature in the same way that boys are. Investigating the missing "discourse of desire" in adolescent girls' sex education, from classes to informal talks with their girlfriends, she found that sex for teenage girls is most often framed in terms of victimization and fear, especially the fear of being raped.

Not that this isn't a realistic concern for teenage girls. Statistics issued in 1994 by the Justice Department reveal that half of all rapes in this country happen to young women under the age of eighteen.

Teenage girls additionally fear unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and losing their reputation. While these fears equally affect all teenage girls, African American girls are most adversely affected by the loss of reputation. Because White girls are assumed to be "good" until proven otherwise, they can often get away with sexual activity with their boyfriends as long as both parties keep quiet. But Black girls, because they are presumed to be "bad," begin with, must work hard to avoid the appearance of sexual impropriety. Perhaps this is why the 1987 Stanford studies of adolescent sexual behavior found that, across the socioeconomic spectrum, there are some Black parents who deliberately delay letting their daughters date. This double standard in dating behavior creates resentment on the part of some African American teenage girls, as reflected in the following comments of Derelle, a seventeen-year-old African American high school senior from St. Louis:

I attend a Catholic high school, and just knowing that my parents are spending their money to send me here, instead of the public school, means I have to be extra careful about what I do. I don't date because everyone knows where that will lead, and I don't want a baby. But it really makes me mad to see all these "good White Catholic girls" getting pregnant, and having all these abortions like there's no tomorrow. Nothing will ever stop them from going to college.

It is obviously unfair to compare the realities of lower-class Black girls with those of middle-class White girls. But to ignore completely how perceptions of race and class interact in the sexual arena would be misleading. Many White girls believe, for example, that Black girls pepper their speech with sexually explicit language, and in general use "dirty" words in an aggressive way, more than White girls do. Poor Black girls also come across as more openly willing to discuss their sexual experiences with one another, even experiences that are negative, such as a painful first intercourse. Former Black Panther Elaine Brown, in her autobiography, A Taste of Power, talks about this kind of sexual frankness while growing up in the projects in Philadelphia. In one scene, Brown tells of listening to a girlfriend who confessed that her "cherry had been broken." The girl bluntly described the less-than-tender first sexual experience: "He took off my skirt and then he took off his pants. . . . Then he got on top of me and pushed it in. Girl, I cried. I screamed my head off. Then all this blood came out me." To Elaine, who was thirteen at the time, the experience sounded dreadful, and she vowed never to endure it.

A White woman named Nana, now in her thirties, similarly recalls a Black girl in high school describing how she came to be pregnant. Nana was particularly shocked by the girl's bluntness.

I was thirteen years old and had just started high school, when this Black male counselor invited ten students to go on this retreat with him. One of the students was a Black girl who was sixteen and visibly pregnant. The counselor asked her -- inappropriately, I might add -- "How'd you get pregnant?" In this real matter-of-fact tone, this girl replied, "I was sitting in the front room and my boyfriend -- he was in the bedroom -- says, 'Hey girl, give me some pussy,' so I did."

Penelope, a White teenager from New York, was similarly surprised by a casual reference about sex made by her Black girlfriend Toni. Toni, who grew up in a lower-class neighborhood, was talking about her thirteen-year-old sister, whom she described as "fast." Penelope's face must have registered her surprise, because Toni quickly added, "You know, in the Black community, a distinction is made between being 'fast' and being 'a slut.' Being fast means only that you have sex with your boyfriend, and there's nothing wrong with that. Being a slut means that you will sleep with anyone, anytime, and that is definitely bad." Penelope privately concluded that even if that were true in the White community, White girls wouldn't talk about sex in such a casual way. In fact, she was somewhat intimidated by hearing about a thirteen-year-old girl who was sexually active.

While such stories are hardly scientific in revealing race differences in early sexual experiences, they do suggest that economically disadvantaged Black girls, if not more likely to be sexually experienced at an earlier age, are certainly more willing to talk about their good and bad sexual experiences. White teenage girls, on the other hand, even those from tough, working-class neighborhoods, tend to be more close-mouthed when it comes to their sexual activities. Of course, nothing informs others faster about one's sexual activities than a pregnancy.

Pregnancy outside marriage has always been viewed as a condition of shame. This is particularly true in the White community. Before the sixties, sexually active teenage girls who got pregnant were shuttled off to relatives, where their babies could be born in secrecy and then given up for adoption. In contrast, unwed Black girls who got pregnant often kept their babies, with other family members pitching in to help raise the child.

Rickie Solinger, author of the 1992 book Wake Up Little Susie: Single Pregnancy and Race Before Roe v. Wade, notes, however, a major race bias in societal reactions to pregnancies outside marriage. While White girls are individually shamed, unwed Black teenage girls are
and you white girl

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collectively shamed, "blamed for the population explosion, for escalating welfare costs, for the existence of unwanted babies, and for the tenacious grip of poverty on blacks in America." To this day, conservative White male politicians paint "black single pregnancy as an affront to white taxpayers and as a display of wanton, racial disobedience."

Despite this negative social pressure, Black teenagers faced with unwanted pregnancies are still more likely to keep their babies than are White teenagers in the same predicament. But a recent six-year-long national study by the Alan Guttmacher Institute concludes that "the higher a teenager's socioeconomic status, the more likely she is to terminate a pregnancy by abortion, regardless of race." As University of California sociologist Jewell Taylor Gibbs sees it, "It isn't the middle-class [Blacks] who are having these babies." Once again, the intersection between race and class tends to obscure the truth.

Black teenage girls are roughly half as likely as White girls to use contraception regularly. Unfortunately, myths about Black women's wanton sexuality actually has the effect of discouraging, rather than encouraging, responsible Black teenage girls from using birth control. An African American teenager named Rochelle, interviewed by education psychologist Deborah Tolman, commented, "When you get birth control pills, people automatically think you're having sex every night, and that's not true." Tolman acknowledges this dilemma, which she feels is particularly acute for Black girls. "Being thought of as sexually insatiable or out of control may be a fear intensified for African American girls, who are creating a sexual identity in a dominant cultural context that stereotypes Black women as alternately asexual and hypersexual." The dilemma for Rochelle is that if she uses birth control, she risks being labeled "bad," but if she doesn't use birth control, she risks an unwanted pregnancy.

Race differences in the use of contraceptives predictably translate into varying rates of unwanted pregnancies and the need to abort. According to 1990 Alan Guttmacher Institute statistics, Black women are roughly twice as likely to have abortions than White women (5.4 per hundred for Black women and 2.2 per hundred for White women). Nonetheless, Blacks have a disproportinate share of adolescent births; while making up only 15 percent of the adolescent population, they represent 29 percent of the adolescents who give birth. But because of White women's greater numbers in the population, their nonmarital births still exceed those of Black women. In 1991, for example, there were 707,500 children born to unmarried White women, accounting for 22 percent of all White women's births, compared to 463,800 children born to unmarried Black mothers, for 68 percent of Black women's births. (These figures are for babies born to all unwed mothers, not just those who are under twenty.) Yet if Black teenage girls who gave birth married their boyfriends as often as White teenagers do, the out-of-wedlock ratio for Black teenagers would drop to what it is now for White teenagers. Despite these figures, the media continue to emphasize pregnancy rates among the poor, especially Black teenage girls, because they are viewed as the mothers draining welfare rolls and receiving AFDC (Aid to Families With Dependent Children).

According to Marian Wright Edelman, founder and president of the Children's Defense Fund, Black teenage girls' higher rates of nonmarital pregnancy have to do with varying responses to unwanted pregnancy than with differences in sexual activity. Single motherhood is more acceptable in the African American community; it also causes fewer setbacks in achievement for Black teenage girls compared to White teenage girls. A Black teenager named Catherine, with a two-year-old child named Tiffany, explains, "If I didn't get pregnant I would have continued on a downward path, going nowhere. They say teenage pregnancy is bad for you, but it was good for me. I know I can't mess around now; I got to worry about what's good for Tiffany and for me." Catherine appears to be right. Research by psychologists Diane Scott-Jones and Sherry Turner indicates that as long as multiple teen pregnancies are avoided, there are only modest differences in educational attainment and income between Black teenage girls who become pregnant and those who delay pregnancy. At most, delaying pregnancy relates to a gain of less than two years of education and $1500 in yearly income. Findings from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth also confirm that compared to White adolescent mothers, Black adolescent mothers have higher high school completion rates and suffer fewer economic consequences. Jean Rhodes, a community psychologist, notes: "When a White teenage girl gets pregnant, her pregnancy breaks more of a norm within the White community and as a result, this behavior tends to cluster around other expressions of deviance, including heavy drinking and drug taking."

African American girls growing up in the poorest, most crime-ridden neighborhoods find that having a baby gives them status and someone to love. These girls have the least knowledge of how contraception works. Some believe such folklore as "You can't get pregnant standing up," or "If you eat greens, you won't get pregnant." Many distrust the White establishment so much that they think contraception is a strategy to limit the number of Black babies born in this country, and react strongly when told to postpone having babies. White women health care educators and practitioners, who don't understand what it means to grow up in gang-infested neighborhoods, where random acts of violence are common occurrences, are completely ineffectual when working with impoverished Black teenage girls. At the very least, White nurses, social workers, and teachers working in the inner city should be aware of the enormous pressures that some Black teenage boys put on Black teenage girls to have their babies now. As one sixteen-year-old African American male gang member put it, "If she ain't gonna drop that load, and I mean real quick-like, then we can't deal. Hell, I'm a Black man and don't know how much longer I'm gonna be here. I got to have me some namesakes." The girlfriend this Black teenager was referring to was only thirteen years old. In contrast, many White teenage boys, seeking to avoid the responsibilities of fatherhood and child care payments, are inclined to put pressure on a pregnant girlfriend to abort. Poorly understood cultural difference in attitudes toward teen pregnancy and unwed motherhood can cause tensions to run high among Black and White female activists working together to improve young women's lives.

Interracial Dating and Marriage

Interracial sexual relationships are quite possibly the biggest source of tension among women of the two races. Were there no history of racism in America, such relationships would barely arouse curiosity. Were there no unequal treatment of women in society, men and women would cross the color line with equal freedom and enthusiasm. Such is not the case.

For nearly three hundred years, Blacks and Whites in this country were legally prohibited from marrying each other. The policy was
initiated by the White political establishment, concerned lest their blood be mixed with that of people seen as inferior. Remarkably, laws
prohibiting interracial marriage were not banned until 1967, when the U.S. Supreme Court, in Loving v. Virginia, finally struck down as
unconstitutional all antimiscegenation statutes. By that time, a host of other barriers to integration were beginning to fall, making it more
likely that Whites and Blacks would meet and fall in love at school and in the workplace. In fact, the sweeping sociological changes set
in motion by the Civil Rights Movement are reflected in the following rates of interracial marriage. In 1970, only 1.5 of every thousand
marriages was racially mixed; by 1990, the figure had almost tripled, to four out of every thousand, with the majority being White-Black.

Of course, many interracial sexual relationships do not result in marriage. The sixties also witnessed a sexual revolution, and sex outside
marriage became more common. Men and women, Whites and Blacks, were ready and willing to experiment sexually. During the ensuing
decades, several patterns in interracial sexual relations began to emerge. Middle-class Blacks, who often grow up in predominantly White
neighborhoods, attend predominantly White colleges and universities, and work in integrated environments, are more likely to date
interracially than are Blacks from lower-class backgrounds. In addition, many more Black men and White women date than Black women
and White men. According to African American scholar Robert Staples, during the "free love" era of the late sixties and early seventies, as
many as 90 percent of the Black males on some college campuses had at least one interracial dating experience. A high percentage of
White women, too, said that they had dated a Black man.

For a variety of reasons, Black women seem to be far less interested in crossing the color line. Only about 30 percent report having dated a
man of another racial background. This difference is reflected, as well, in statistics on interracial marriage. As of the early 1990s,
71 percent, or 156,000 of all Black-White interracial marriages, involved African American men marrying White women, and only 29
percent, or 75,000, involved African American women marrying White men.

In recent years, Black-White dating and mating has been the subject of numerous articles and books, but none has specifically focused on
how the issues affect the relationships of White and Black women. Because of the disproportionate number of Black men marrying and
dating White women, one effect has been to drive Black and White women apart. Not surprisingly, African American women have become
angry at White women for "stealing" Black men, already in short supply.

Statistics show that in the general population there are about seven Black men to every ten Black women. Among Whites, there are ten
men to every nine women. While certainly not every woman, Black or White, is looking for a man, the more Black men who turn to White
women, the fewer are available for interested Black women. These differences are reflected in recent Census Bureau findings indicating
that by the age of thirty, three fourths of all White women are married, but by the same age, fewer than half that number of Black women
are. And by the age of forty, the statistics are more grim. As few as one in ten White women has never been married, but nearly one in four
Black women who reaches the age of forty has never been married. The situation is even worse for college-educated, successful African
American women, perhaps because there are fewer suitable Black men for them to marry. But what infuriates Black women the most is that
the more successful an African American man is, the more likely he is to marry a woman who is light-skinned, either Black or White. This
pattern was first identified by anthropologist Melville Herskovits during the sixties, and documented again in the eighties by sociologists
Elizabeth Mullins and Paul Sites. These researchers found that eminent Black men were far more likely to have light-skinned partners than
were eminent Black women. For the average African American woman, though, the pattern of successful African American men marrying
light and especially White is confirmed by simple observation. Everywhere they look, they see Black male celebrities, from composer and
record producer Quincy Jones, to Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, playwright August Wilson, and actors Sidney Poitier and James
Earl Jones, married to White women. Even more disturbing is the perceived trend of celebrity Black men, most notably O. J. Simpson,
divorcing a first wife who is Black and replacing her with one who is White once fame and wealth are achieved. Instead of being angry at
Black men for doing this, it is more expedient for African American women to blame White women. So deep, in fact, is the rage at White
women for marrying successful African American men that, on hearing that 0. J. Simpson had battered and possibly brutally murdered his
beautiful White wife, Nicole, more than a few African American women were heard to mutter, under their breath, that it served her right,
and him, too, for messing around with her.

Anger over this issue goes back at least as far as the Civil Rights Movement, when White women and Black men, working together to
register Blacks to vote, first realized and acted upon their sexual attraction to each other. The distrust continues. Among White and Black
women working together for common political causes, fears about interracial dating can destroy sisterly relations. Carolyn Rodgers, an
African American, captured the uneasy feelings in her 1976 poem "I Have Been Hungry," an excerpt of which appears as one of this
chapter's epigraphs.

White women who date or marry Black men, on the other hand, are often taken aback and confused by the fury of Black women over this
issue. Among those surprised by the rage of African American women is Gail Mathabane, co-author of Love in Black and White. Gail
expected her marriage to a Black man to irritate White bigots, but she never dreamed that it would anger Black women. "I was made to feel
that I had committed some sort of unspoken crime against the black community, particularly black women." Gail Mathabane clearly was
more baffled than upset by the reactions of African American women to her interracial marriage. But some white women respond with
hostility: "Yes, Black women are angry, and no, I'm not going to obsess over it. If they didn't give their Black men so much shit all the time,
maybe their men wouldn't seek out White women."

Most White women, however, are simply disappointed and hurt by Black women's anger, as in the case of Lynn, an attractive, tall
collegiate volleyball player with blond hair and green eyes. When Lynn started dating an African American star basketball player on
campus, the Black female athletes began ignoring her. Commenting on the subject of interracial dating, Lynn said, "If I were them, I would
be happy about it. I would think, there goes someone who is not prejudiced, someone who accepts us for who we are." White women who
date or marry Black men often see themselves as positive race ambassadors, helping to bridge the racial divide. African American women,
however, do not, in part because the reverse situation does not equally apply. White women who claim, "I don't have a problem with Black
women dating White men, so why should they have a problem with White women dating Black men?” tend to infuriate African American women. They simply don't believe that the issues are interchangeable when there is no shortage of White men, and when the reasons for Black men choosing a White woman or even a light-skinned Black woman are so rooted in color prejudice.

Interracial dating can be something of a mine field; sympathetic White women aren't sure how to react. They do not know what such relationships may mean to Black women in personal or political terms. An attractive middle-aged White woman, who for several years has been dating an African American man named Stanley, reflected on the complexities of this issue:

I understand their anger; I really do. But I love Stanley. I didn't plan to fall in love with him. It just happened. And now that it has, am I supposed to give him up just because Black women don't even know don't like it? That just doesn't make sense to me. And he's happy, too. What about him?

Deborah, a White woman of Jewish faith, after moving in with a Black man whom she met during the Civil Rights Movement, found herself paralyzed by her own feelings of guilt. She was unable, for example, to establish any positive relationship with her boyfriend's Black female friends. She even confessed to letting these women verbally abuse her, something that, as a feminist, she did not tolerate from anyone else. Finally, her boyfriend snapped at Deborah, "Why don't you stand up to them? They're losing respect for you, and frankly, so am I. I thought you were stronger than that." But Deborah could think of nothing to say in her defense. Her relationship ultimately fell apart, in large part, Deborah now thinks, because of her private sense of guilt and betrayal of her African American "sisters."

Ironically, White women who claim they would never date a Black man can still insult Black women. Although most African American women don't want White women to date interracially, in theory they would at least like White women to find African American men attractive. A White woman named Deana discovered this when she mentioned to her African American girlfriend Temple, "I don't care if Whites or Blacks date or marry each other; I just wouldn't do it. I would never date a Black guy." Temple shot back, "Are you telling me that no African American woman can, no matter how beautiful she is.

On the whole, White women don't seem to feel threatened by the possibility that some White men find Black women more physically attractive. After all, it is White women in our society, not Black women, who set the culture's ideals of feminine beauty and attractiveness. When a White man pursues an African American woman, most White women just think his taste in women is quirky. But when a Black man pursues a White woman, it confirms a deep fear in some Black women that they are not pretty enough by society's standards.

A 1992 article in the New York Times by African American novelist Bebe Moore Campbell describes just how fast these raw feelings of insecurity can surface among even the most successful and competent of African American women. Campbell told of the time that she and several of her African American girlfriends were eating lunch at a "trendy Beverly Hills restaurant." Suddenly, a good-looking, well-known Black actor walked in, trailing behind him a White woman. As if on cue, Campbell and her friends threw down their forks and moaned and cursed under their breath. Only later did Campbell reflect on why they had reacted so strongly:

For many African-American women, the thought of black men, particularly those who are successful, dating or marrying white women is like being passed over at the prom by the boy we consider our steady date, causing us pain, rage and an overwhelming sense of betrayal and personal rejection . . . For sisters, the message that we don't measure up is the nightmare side of integration.

Social psychological research on the roles of physical attractiveness and race in interracial relationships confirms African American women's worse fears. Interracial love doesn't just happen randomly; it is the result of careful, if unconscious, consideration of what the other person has to offer, an exchange in the interpersonal marketplace. This is exactly what White social psychologist Bernard Murstein and his colleagues hypothesized in a 1989 study -- that the Black members of courting interracial couples would be relatively more attractive than the White members. That is, in a Whitedominated, racially unequal culture, the lower status of being Black would have to be offset by relatively greater physical attractiveness. To test this hypothesis, the physical attractiveness of each member of twenty married interracial couples was judged by a panel of four, made up of two men and two women, two of whom were White and two of whom were Black. Their findings were mixed. The Black men were rated as significantly more attractive than their White female partners, but the Black women were rated neither higher nor lower in attractiveness than their White male partners.

Another study, by African American clinical graduate student Camille Baughn, yielded similar results in 1993. Male and female research participants were asked to view eight pictures of people of the opposite sex of varying race and physical attractiveness. The subjects were asked to indicate how attractive they thought each person was, and how willing they would be to date each one. African Americans and Whites of both sexes generally expressed higher dating preferences for members of their own race and for those of greater physical attractiveness. In general, men expressed greater interest in cross-race dating than women, and African Americans rated Whites as more physically attractive than Whites rated African Americans. However, Baughn also observed that African American men rated White women as more desirable to date than African American women rated White men. Baughn concluded that African American men and women embrace the notion that "Black is Beautiful" differently.

In a society where race has played such a pivotal role, White women are still too often viewed as the ultimate prize for successful African American men. White women, even those who aren't seen as particularly attractive, can still lighten the line for African American men in a way that no African American woman can, no matter how beautiful she is.

Not all Black and White women condemn interracial dating, though, and some women of different races are brought together by it. A
White school administrator named Nancy B., for example, one day asked an African American female colleague whether she would mind keeping a lookout for her boyfriend. "He's bringing some greens for me." Her colleague, putting two and two together, guessed that anyone bringing by "greens" must be African American. She asked Nancy, "Is your boyfriend, by any chance, Black?" When Nancy replied, "Yes," the Black woman said, "Well, guess what? My boyfriend is White!" The two of them celebrated by doing a little jig together. They also began confiding in each other things that before they had kept to themselves. Anecdotal evidence like this suggests that, compared with Black women who claim they would never go out with a White man, African American women who date interracially tend to be more accepting of White women who similarly cross the color line. In addition to understanding the nature of cross-race attractions, such African American women are less personally threatened by the shortage of available Black men.

For both groups of women who date and marry interracially, female relatives of the male partner are another potential source of cross-race connection. Sonya, an African American who is currently engaged to a White Italian named Johnny, gets along very well with her fiance's mother. "Not long after meeting her, I told my future mother-in-law that I respected the non-gendered way in which she had raised her son. From then on, there was never any question that we would get along fine. After all, we were both feminists." White women, too, report stories of love and acceptance with the women in the family of their African American boyfriend or husband.

More often, though, White and Black women report difficult relations with the relatives of their cross-race lover or spouse. An African American female college student named Jamillah, who was dating a White man, became aware that his mother and sisters were sabotaging the relationship by not relaying her phone messages to him. As a result, their plans were constantly being derailed. When her boyfriend broke up with her, Jamillah was convinced that his relatives were largely responsible. Many African American family members, especially mothers, are similarly inclined to respond poorly to a White girlfriend brought home by a son or brother. In fact, some African American men are expressly told never to do this. The Black writer Darrell Dawsey explains why he would never date interracially:

Some of the distance I kept from White women resulted from my upbringing . . . my mother did not approve of interracial romance. Not unlike other African American women, she had suffered the pain of being marginalized by a racist, sexist mainstream that fraudently promotes white women as the benchmark of womanhood . . . The rule quietly in place around Ma's house was "If she can't use your comb, don't bring her home."

When attitudes like this prevail, a White woman, no matter how politically aware or racially sensitive she may be, will find it difficult, if not impossible, to establish good relations with the female relatives of her African American boyfriend or husband. Needless to say, such tensions only add to the stress of making interracial relationships work.

Despite such resistance from family members and friends, interracial dating and mating continue to grow in popularity. And as they increase, there is a growing backlash. In March 1994, a White principal named Hulond Humphries, of Wedowee, Alabama, allegedly told a mixed-race female student that she was a "mistake" (for having been born of a White-Black union), and also attempted to ban interracial dating at the upcoming school prom. Although Humphries was suspended for his racist actions, he was not immediately fired. The prom went on without the ban, but sometime later the school was destroyed by a fire of suspicious origins.

As members of both races struggle with the significance of interracial sexual relationships, women's relations with one another suffer. African American poet and essayist Audre Lorde believes, however, that the hostility so many Black women feel toward White women for dating Black men is misdirected and ultimately destructive:

It can never result in true progress on the issue because it does not question the vertical lines of power or authority, nor the sexist assumptions which dictate the terms of that competition. And the racism of white women might be better addressed where it is less complicated by their own sexual oppression. In this situation it is not the non-Black woman who calls the tune, but rather the Black man who turns away from himself in his sisters or who, through a fear borrowed from white men, reads her strength not as a resource but as a challenge.

**Interracial Lesbian Relationships**

The rate of interracial sexual involvement among lesbians is even greater than it is among heterosexuals, although exact figures are hard to come by. Perhaps because lesbians have already challenged one of society's fundamental taboos, they are more open to challenging others. For whatever reason, the interracial relationships formed by White and Black lesbians are often emotionally charged.

Like their heterosexual counterparts, lesbian women who cross race lines for love and sex must contend with societal racism and sexual inequality. In addition, lesbians must also deal with antigay sentiment -- what is termed homophobia or, more recently, heterosexism. These sources of discrimination uniquely challenge White and African American lesbians romantically involved with each other.

Having been raised in a pervasively heterosexual society, most lesbians, regardless of race, must first overcome their own homophobia -- the internalized fear and self-hatred leading them to wonder whether something is wrong with them for being attracted to members of their own sex. African American lesbians, in particular those who go out with White women, must additionally ask themselves whether their interracial dating reflects an expression of their own internalized racism or self-hatred, something that perhaps renders them incapable of loving another woman who is Black. Having grown up in a color-conscious, racially biased culture, Black lesbians are not immune from the usual prejudice that lighter is somehow better, a step up. Such anxieties, in fact, are poignantly captured in the following excerpt from "does it matter if she's white?" by Dajenya, a lesbian biracial African American-Jewish poet:

*does it matter if she's white?*

*does it matter*
if sistahs and brothahs
look at me askance
not only cause she's a she
but cause she's white?

does it matter
if dykes of color even think there's something
wrong with me
some auntie Tom
in my soul
some self hate
that must exist
if I would choose
a white woman?

does it matter
if I try to justify
defend
if I point out that
my mother's white
so you see
it's only natural
any relationship I enter into
is necessarily
interracial

As Dajenya's poem suggests, in addition to their own questioning of their sexual and color preferences, they must contend with the
accusations of other "dykes of color." Many African American lesbians are quick to assign ulterior motives to others in their community
who love White women. "Black lesbians who date White women are suffering from self-hate," says one Black lesbian named Rhonda.
"They think some White woman is going to lift them up." African American scholar Brenda Verner similarly claims, "Like Black men who
have become obsessed with white women, many black lesbian feminists are caught in the net of 'jungle fever.'"

Such strident criticism of interracial dating from both lesbian and heterosexual members of the Black community can make it doubly hard
on African American lesbians who do enter into relationships with White women. Mary Morten, former president of the Chicago chapter
of NOW, described what happened to her one evening:

I was at a party with my White girlfriend, and this Black woman started hitting on me. When my White lover saw what was
going on, she came over and sat next to me, kind of making it clear that the two of us were together. Well, this other woman,
who was being so nice and friendly, all of sudden turned vindictive. Then, after finding out that I was president of NOW, she
very snootily commented, "Oh, that's why you've got a White girlfriend."

Such attitudes also undermine the feelings of White lesbians who date Black women. One White lesbian began to wonder whether her
Black partner was going with her only to gain status. Other White lesbians who date interracially worry that they are a liability for their
Black girlfriends, who are put in the position of having to defend their choice of a White lover to other Black lesbians. And still other
White lesbians, including Shawna, are disturbed by what they see as "Black liberal guilt" in regard to their interracial dating.

My Black girlfriend once dropped my hand when a group of radical Black lesbians walked in the room. It really made me mad, and I
think her attitude about me being White was something that ultimately led to us breaking up. It is very hard on Black lesbians to have
other Black lesbians accuse them of being politically incorrect, or betraying Black sisterhood.

Certainly not all African American lesbians believe that having a White lover implies a lack of self-esteem or absence of racial pride.
African American lesbian scholar Cheryl Clarke is among those who defend interracial relationships. In her article "Lesbianism: An Act of
Resistance," Clarke writes:

It cannot be presumed that black lesbians involved in love, work, and social relationships with white lesbians do so out of self-hate
and denial of our racial-cultural heritage, identities, and oppression. Why should a woman's commitment to the struggle be
questioned or accepted on the basis of her lover's or comrades' skin color? White lesbians engaged likewise with black lesbians or any
lesbians of color cannot be assumed to be acting out of some perverse, guilt-ridden racialist desire.

Clarke's argument that White lesbians who date interracially cannot be presumed to be acting out of "guilt-ridden racialist desire" relates to
another common accusation: that they are only "ethnic chasers." Ethnic chasers, according to White lesbian psychologists D. Merilee
Clunis and C. Dorsey Green, in their book Lesbian Couples: Creating Healthy Relationships for the gos, are White women who pursue
Black women because they feel guilty about being White. They seek "color by proximity" to prove just how liberal they really are.

The fear that White liberal guilt, or some other misguided attraction based solely on color, is what's really driving a White woman's pursuit
can leave some African American lesbians wondering whether they are just an exotic fantasy." Marilyn, a Black lesbian Chicago-based
and you white girl http://condor.depaul.edu/~mwilson/divided/chptfour.htm

I'm not sure if Marilyn was a filmmaker, but even if she was, after being actively pursued by a White woman, she decided not to date the woman because of her constant references to Marilyn as an "African Goddess."

Another issue that women in interracial lesbian relationships must contend with is how their different skin color grants them different privileges in society. Kim Hall addresses this point in an essay entitled "Learning to Touch Honestly: A White Lesbian's Struggle With Racism":

Because I am white, I have benefited and continue to benefit from white skin privilege, even though being a lesbian has denied other privileges. Being a lesbian does not change the fact that my physical being in the world is safer than that of a lesbian of color. My white skin remains.

While it may be true that White lesbian women are more sensitive than heterosexual White women to what it means to be part of an oppressed minority, lesbians can still hide their "stigma" whenever they choose. That is, unlike race and color, sexual preference cannot be discerned from appearance alone. As Patty K., a Black lesbian from USC, puts it, "When we walk through any door, no one really knows whether we are gay or not. But one thing they know for sure is that we are Black." bell hooks makes a similar point: "Often homophobic attacks on gay people occur in situations when knowledge of sexual preference is indicated or established outside of gay bars, for example. Blacks can't hide their color."

To cope with the often heavy baggage of self-doubt, guilt, and resentment that can accompany interracial lesbian relationships, lesbian couples frequently turn to support groups. Cynthia W., a White lesbian, and her Black lover, after moving from Chicago to New York in the early eighties, decided to start one of their own. Once a month, women in the group took turns holding potluck dinners and discussing in depth the issues facing them. The women found it especially helpful to reserve part of the evening for those of each racial group to talk separately to each other.

Of the many issues that came up at the meetings was the fact that when the interracial couple was at home alone, their racial differences were rarely an issue, but when the two went out together, race was nearly always a problem. In restaurants, White waiters would often approach the White woman first and, at the end of the meal, give her the check. Dance clubs also appealed to either a mostly White or mostly Black clientele, and when a racially mixed couple went out, one of them commonly felt out of place. Housing, too, was a problem. Cynthia recalled the time when she looked for an apartment to share with her lover. After finding what she thought was the perfect place, she brought her Black lover to show it to her, and discovered that the landlord had had a sudden change of mind about the apartment's availability. For White women not used to such blatant racism, it can be an eye-opening and a devastating experience. While it also hurts Black women, most have developed emotional armor over the years that helps to protect them from the constant harsh realities of racism.

Because Black lesbians, in particular, face discrimination on so many different fronts -- from Whites for being Black, from men for being female, and from other Blacks for being lesbian -- many have sought and found relief in exclusive African American lesbian support groups, such as the Black Lesbian Support (BLSG) in Washington, Chicago's African American Women's Alliance, Cleveland's Sistahparty, and L.A.'s Lesbians of Color (LOC). Some White lesbians take offense at Black lesbians segregating into their own groups. A thirty-year-old White lesbian named Jennifer Ann H. said, "As lesbians we must all stick together. We can't afford to show any hint of division. Groups shouldn't be created that exclude any other lesbian." But Lisa P., a Black lesbian from the University of Chicago, disagreed. When asked whether she felt that Black lesbians organizing among themselves would breed contempt for White lesbians, or whether clubs for "gay wimmin of color only" would be detrimental to lesbian alliances, Lisa responded:

It is important that White lesbians understand that although we share a lot of the same struggles, Black lesbians have a unique set of battles that we must confront as well. We may have being lesbian in common, but our biggest and most obvious difference still remains our color. And, yes, racism is alive and well in the gay community.

For Lisa, as for many Black lesbians, issues of race will always come ahead of those having to do with being gay. Venus Medina, a project officer at the CDC in Atlanta, says that "most Black lesbians identify as Black women first and lesbians second." Yet the notion that race supersedes sexual orientation remains a difficult one for many White lesbians to accept.

In comparison to White lesbians, African American lesbians may have a special need to come together for support, given the greater hatred against them in their community. An African American author, Ann Allen Shockley, discusses just how strong this homophobia is in her 1974 novel Loving Her, dealing with an interracial lesbian affair. The Black heroine, Renay, who falls in love with a White woman, considers whether she should "come out" to her best straight Black friend Fran. Deciding against it, Renay reflects:

Black women were the most vehement about women loving each other. This kind of love was worse to them than the acts of adultery or incest, for it was homophobic. It was worse than being inflicted with an incurable disease. Black women could be sympathetic about illegitimacy, raising the children of others, having affairs with married men-but not toward lesbianism, which many blamed on white women.

Black lesbian scholar Barbara Smith, in Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology, analyzes why many in the African American community remain strongly opposed to homosexuality:

Heterosexual privilege is usually the only privilege that Black women have. None of us have racial or sexual privilege, almost none of us have class privilege, maintaining "straightness" is our last resort.

In other words, to give up the one privilege that African American women enjoy seems to others an act of suicide, worse yet, an act of
This attitude is certainly reflected in the following comments of Bernita, a forty-year-old Black mother of four:

If the Black community supports gay life, then what is to happen to the Black family, which is already in danger? And Black lesbians? I just can't accept this. We are the mothers of this earth. Without us there will be no more Black children. No MLKs [Martin Luther King] would ever be born again, no Sojourner Truths, no great Black men and women. The Black family is the backbone of our community, and we all have a responsibility to preserve it.

Even the respected Black psychiatrist Frances Cress Welsing voices such concern when she states, "If we endorse homosexuality, then we have endorsed the death of our people." Ironically, despite the fear of some Black heterosexuals that lesbianism is just "another trick the Man pulled out of his genocide trickbag," Black lesbians are actually far more likely to have children than White lesbians.

Regardless of whether antigay sentiment is stronger among Blacks or Whites-and some lesbians believe there is no difference in the rates of homophobia-negative attitudes toward lesbianism are stressful. And the stress is especially great for women involved in interracial relationships, if only because they stand out more than lesbian couples of the same race. Smith has written about this issue, as well: "Whenever I had a lover of a different race, I felt that it was like having a sign or billboard over my head that said: 'These are dykes. Right here.' " In the book Lesbian Psychologies, a White Jewish middle-class lesbian named Sarah commented:

What I was very aware of, at the beginning of our relationship, was how visible I felt with her. And I was aware of the whole ideal of being with a black woman. When we would walk down the street, I felt that it was like wearing placards that said "lesbian." And that was very unsettling.

Obviously, it is to lesbians' advantage to avoid standing out in public or otherwise calling attention to themselves. Research on hate crimes indicates that racism, sexism, and homophobia cluster together, especially among religiously conservative men, who are among the most homophobic. To such people, the sight of a White and Black woman together, in love and having fun, fans the flames of intolerance. More than any other relationship, an interracial lesbian relationship challenges the "traditional" structure of society.

In addition to, the hostile reactions of strangers, a lesbian woman who dates interracially may have to fend off the hostilities of her partner's family. Amy, a White lesbian, talks about what happened the one time her Black lover, Nancy, took Amy home to meet the parents:

It was clear that Nancy's parents did not like me, but it was hard to tell what bothered them more--that their daughter was gay--or that she was with someone White. All I know is that being in her parents' home was one of the most uncomfortable experiences of my life.

An African American lesbian named JoAnn W. confesses that it was difficult enough for her mother to accept that her daughter was lesbian, but when JoAnn introduced her White lover, her mother demanded to know, "Why couldn't you at least bring home a Black woman?" It can be equally hard on African American lesbians visiting the homes of their White girlfriends, although the issues may be slightly different. Black women, for example, resent it when White girlfriends act as though their parents are so liberal that race doesn't matter, when they know that it always does.

That two women of varying racial backgrounds can passionately love each other should offer hope to other women trying to come together, for whatever purpose. Ann Allen Shockley writes of the promise as well as the mystery of interracial love in Loving Her. In one scene, Renay, who is lightskinned, reflects on her growing attractions for her White lover, Terry:

Tracing the whiteness of Terry's skin with her finger, Renay thought, It is amazing how I can lie here and see and feel this skin and not think of the awful things others of her color have done to us. And yet, my skin is light-tinged with the sun. Someone, somewhere in the past, must have done and thought and felt like this with another--or hated in a different and helpless way.

Interracial relationships require honest communication and a lot of hard work if they are to succeed. Regardless of whether the couple is heterosexual or homosexual, each member must make a determined effort to understand the other's cultural uniqueness. This means, among other things, granting a partner the freedom to express his or her differences. Compared with White Americans, who are often raised with a sense of "rugged individualism," African Americans tend to have a more communal sense of identity, to see themselves as part of a larger group. Blacks also tend to be more bicultural -- that is, more adept at operating within both the White culture and the Black culture. Members of the dominant culture frequently know only how to interact comfortably with others of their own race. Thus, at social gatherings, a White lover in a group of African Americans is more likely to feel self-conscious and out of place than would an African American lover in a group of Whites. These differences need to be understood by White and Black women alike if they are to get along.

Sexual Violence and Exploitation

The intersection of sex and violence is another major or source of tension between women of European and African descent, even if that intersection is usually controlled by men. With rare exceptions, women do not assault batter, molest, or stalk one another. Lesbian rape, for example, accounts for less than 1 percent of all rapes. But relations between African American and White women are still affected by sexual violence and exploitation, if only because of the women's different responses to them. In general, White women view rape, harassment, and battering solely in terms of gender. Most African American women, however, view sexual abuse first in terms of race and only second in terms of gender. This fundamental difference in perspective and interpretation of sexual abuse strains women's political alliances.
For African American women, rape historically, as noted earlier, is linked with slavery; White slave owners forced themselves sexually on Black women, who had no legal recourse to stop their abuse. (Nor did they have protection against rape by slave men.) Only White women could bring charges of rape. With regard to interracial rape, this meant that only those cases involving White women and Black men were heard, even though there were far many more incidents of White men raping Black women.

The history of rape also conjures up incidents involving White women's false accusations against Black men, accusations that have led to the lynchings of innocent fathers, sons, and brothers. That some White women made such accusations remains difficult for African Americans of both sexes to accept. Although White women as a group were politically powerless to stop either the rape or lynching of slaves, that so few tried is cause for continuing distrust by Black women of their White "sisters."

In conjunction with this bitter history, there are contemporary reasons, as well, that African American women view rape more in terms of race than of gender. The most disturbing has to do with racial inequality in law enforcement and the criminal justice system. To this day, police officers are less likely to believe, or treat respectfully, Black women who claim to have been raped. African American women have found their version of events often dismissed by police. A twenty-nine-year-old Black hairdresser named Mary Kay explains why she didn't bother to report when she was raped. "Saying something won't make a difference. They would only say that I asked for it anyway. I'm a Black woman, you know. And it was a Black man who took advantage of me." A Black manicurist known as K.K. called the police after her ex-boyfriend assaulted her. "He held me down and tried to smash his penis in my face. When I called the police and they saw I was Black and found that I'd once dated my attacker, who was also Black, they treated me as if I'd wanted it. It's just not worth it for me. Knowing what I know, I probably just shouldn't have called the police anyway. All they do is think Black women are sluts and Black men only have sex on their minds." Of course, many White women's reports of acquaintance rape are treated similarly by police officers, but White women don't have their race as an additional factor working against them.

Research indicates that when rape cases do make it to court, the accused is more likely to walk when the victim is Black than when she is White. African American legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw cites a case revealing all too well how this can happen. After hearing evidence that a Black teenager was raped, one White juror argued for acquittal on the grounds that a girl of her age from "that kind of neighborhood" probably wasn't a virgin, anyway. In those rare circumstances when a rape conviction is obtained, the average prison sentence for a man raping a Black woman is two years, compared with the ten years he is likely to get for raping a White woman. Justice is even more skewed in the case of interracial rape. No White male in this country has ever been given the death penalty for raping a Black woman, yet many Black men, innocent and guilty, have been sentenced to death for raping White women.

Despite reports in the media, most rapes are not interracial. According to the U.S. Department of justice, among those cases involving a single offender, about seven out of every ten White victims were raped by a White offender, and about eight out of every ten Black victims were raped by a Black offender. But it is interracial rape that makes the big headlines and stirs public reaction.

Nowhere was this more evident than in the highly publicized case of the Central Park jogger, a White woman who was beaten and gang-raped by a group of Black teenagers out "wilding." During that same week, there was another gang rape involving a young Black woman from Brooklyn. A New York prosecutor described her attack as "one of the most brutal in recent years." She was raped, sodomized, and thrown fifty feet off the top of a four-story building. Witnesses testified that the victim "screamed as she plunged down the air shaft." Both her ankles and legs were shattered, as well as her pelvis, and she suffered extensive internal injuries. But few in America know about this woman's fate. Not only was she Black, but so were her assailants.

An African American woman who is raped by a member of her own race thus faces a dilemma. If she brings charges against the Black man, especially one as well known as Mike Tyson, she is harshly criticized by others in the community for bringing down a Black man. She also plays a role, however unwittingly, in perpetuating the stereotype that Black men are sexually dangerous. Thus, a Black woman who is raped by a man of her own race must always consider whether it is better to keep quiet about the attack, thereby saving the reputation of Black men who are innocent, or to speak out and thereby possibly save other women from the same fate. A White woman is not placed in this quandary. When she accuses a White man of rape, whether her charges are believed or not, they do not become a collective indictment of White men. Because of their different experiences in this regard, White women usually discount the importance of race in the politics of rape. They find it difficult to understand Black women's reluctance to report instances of rape. To White women, if a man rapes, no matter what his color, he should be caught and punished.

These differences in reactions to rape can fiercely divide women, even those working together to reduce sexual violence in their communities. In 1993, an interracial rape case involving a Black man attacking a woman of Asian descent was reported on the campus of a well-known Midwestern university. The women's studies faculty members gathered to discuss how the school should respond. The White female faculty members were angry that the university was not doing enough to make the campus safe for its female students, staff, and faculty. But the African American faculty were angry over the university's posting throughout the campus a police sketch of the accused. One African American woman present at the meeting argued that the pictures were not helping to solve the crime, but were promoting the stereotype that all Black men were criminally dangerous. In reaction to her position, a White woman responded, "So, are we, as women, to put our lives at risk just to protect the reputation of Black men? No way! This guy needs to be caught and caught now, and if that means blanketing the campus with his picture, then that's what has to be done." The meeting broke up with nothing resolved but with new tension between the White and Black faculty members that took months to dissipate. Nearly a year later, the White woman who had spoken up at the meeting learned that the issue for the Black faculty member was not so much that the pictures of a Black man were being posted, but that the quality of the pictures was extremely poor. They were so unclear that the man looked indistinguishable from any other Black man. Even a relatively minor miscommunication like this, though, can have a major divisive effect on women's cross-race relationships.

Crime statistics show that African American women are more likely to be raped than White women. One reason has to do with the
impoverished neighborhoods that proportionately more Black women than White women are forced to live in, and the generally higher levels of violence that accompany conditions of poverty. Statistics indicate that low-income African American women are the most likely to be raped. This sexual violence against Black women is, in the words of Audre Lorde, "a disease striking the heart of Black nationhood, and silence will not make it disappear."

Increasingly, however, African American feminists are encouraging others in their community to speak up about their abuse. Ms. editor Marcia Gillespie is among those who hope that African American women will hold their men "accountable for [their] everyday acts of incest, battery, rape, domestic violence and sexual harassment." She also maintains that those African American women who do speak up about sexual violence at the hands of Black men must stop being turned into "pariahs," as happened to Desiree Washington, the young Black woman who brought the charges of sexual assault against Tyson.

As Gillespie's remarks make clear, rape is by no means the only issue of sexual violence that needs to be addressed by the African American community. Incest, battering, domestic violence, and harassment also terrorize women. Again, it is mostly White feminists who have brought much of the needed attention to these areas. But in articulating concerns about sexual violence, White feminists have missed an opportunity to bridge the cultural gap between themselves and Black women; they have not always been sensitive to how the issues may affect those who are African American. For example, when White women first raised sexual harassment as a problem in the workplace, they focused nearly exclusively on its occurrence in white collar jobs -- the kind of jobs that middle-class White women were starting to occupy. They virtually ignored the long history of sexual abuse and harassment of those in domestic service-the kind of work that was traditionally performed by mostly African American women.

The same inequality of attention hinders discussion of domestic violence. White feminists generally see the issue in terms of an imbalance of power between men and worsen, while African American women see domestic violence growing out of racial oppression. This difference is evident in the trial of O. J. Simpson. The majority of White women claim to be color blind in their reactions to the case. Nicole was a wife apparently battered by a man who held the purse strings. In stark contrast, African American women see race as central to the trial, believing that whether O. J. Simpson is innocent or guilty, the media blitz that followed his arrest would not have been nearly as great had he been White or been married to a woman of his own race.

That women of European and African descent have such different takes shows how important it is that White and Black women recognize and acknowledge their different perceptions and reactions to events like this. Each group has something to gain from listening to the other.

Prostitution, and pornography are two other areas involving women's sexual images and exploitation that are magnified by race. White feminists took the lead in arguing for better protection of women in the sex industry and documenting the harmful effects of pornography, but African American feminists, including Alice Walker and bell hooks, have also been active in pointing out the ways in which issues of race and sex collide.

That racial inequality exists in the sex industries can hardly be disputed. One indication is the racial makeup of the women who are prostitutes. Becoming a prostitute is not a career that a young woman aspires to, nor is it something that just happens to anyone. Nearly every prostitute has had a prior history of sexual abuse. When this history is combined with little formal education or professional job training conditions that exist more frequently among African American women than White women, the result is a disproportionate number of Black women walking the streets. According to statistics compiled by the Women's Action Coalition, 40 percent of all street prostitutes are women of color.

Arrests and conviction rates are even more biased by race. An estimated 50 percent of prostitutes rounded up by the police are Black, and an estimated 85 percent of all prostitutes sentenced to jail are women of color. Race differences in arrest records also mean that when African American prostitutes later try to get out of the business, they are plagued more heavily by their past than are their White counterparts.

White prostitutes are less likely to work the streets, where most arrests for soliciting occur. Compared with Black prostitutes, White prostitutes do more escort servicing, which pays better and is considered relatively prestigious. Yet even when White prostitutes and Black prostitutes do work side by side on the street, White prostitutes make more money. One reason is that when a White john picks up a prostitute -- and most johns are White -- he calls less attention to himself when he walks away with a woman who is White. As a result, White prostitutes are more frequent flyers. As one Black prostitute angrily put it, "White whores get paid way more than Black whores and we turn better tricks." When a prostitute named Blanca worked the streets, some of the Black prostitutes resented her simply for being White. To get them to like her, Blanca had to find ways to lessen the racial tension. "After I showed the Black women that I was not going to 'georgia' [steal] their man, they would relax with me, and perhaps we could even become friends. But for some Black women, there was always that mistrust for me just because my skin was white."

The pornography industry is another area where racial inequality explosively combines with sexual inequality to exploit and debase women. Psychologists Gloria Cowan and Robin Campbell, analyzing pornographic videos in a 1994 study, concluded that blatant racism exists in the sex industry. Cowan and Campbell set out to explore whether there were race differences in the kinds of sexual acts that Whites and Blacks were asked to perform. Four coders analyzed twenty interracial videos. They discovered that Black women were subordinated more and subjected to greater aggression and nonphysical aggression than White women. One video in particular, *Let Me Tell Ya 'Bout Black Chicks*, shocked Cowan and Campbell. It portrayed an African American woman willfully having sex with two White men in KKK hoods, who enter her bedroom window after observing her masturbating to gospel music. Such racist images perpetuate the myths handed down from the time of slavery. As Alice Walker put it, in writing about pornography in her 1984 book *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down*, "Where white women are depicted as human bodies if not beings, black women are depicted as shit."
As White and Black women increase their efforts to bring an end to sexual violence, perhaps they will find that issues of race and culture will lead them to fight more of their battles together. For example, White and Black female activists worked together to denounce the practice of female genital mutilation in parts of Africa. White women can offer their support on the issue, but they risk coming across as racist if they try on their own to stop it. Ultimately, this is a topic that must involve women of African descent, as well. Ironically, even Alice Walker, who has done so much to raise awareness of female genital mutilation, has been criticized by some African leaders for interfering in the traditions of those on another continent. But instead of discouraging women from speaking out and presenting their views as a united front, such criticisms should only remind Black and White women that their different reactions and perspectives help to counter criticism along the lines of race or politics.

There are many such arenas in which White and Black women can work -- and fight -- together. Only by doing so can they hope to bring an end to attitudes and beliefs that severely limit women's sexual expression and freedom.