

# **CAN WE IGNORE THE PERSPECTIVE OF BLACK WOMEN ON THEIR OWN EXPERIENCE?**

***A Response to Jeffries, with Reference to Takara***

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## **INTRODUCTION**

“Looking Behind the Stereotypes of the ‘Angry Black Woman’: An Exploration of Black Women’s Responses to Interracial Relationships,” published in *Gender and Society* in August 2005, was an effort to bring those voices routinely marginalized or ignored into the debate on contemporary interracial relationships. In 2004, I was writing *Navigating Interracial Borders: Black-White Couples and Their Social Worlds* (2005), the culmination of years of qualitative research on societal responses to interracial relationships and the opposition that still exists toward Black-White relationships in White and Black communities. In my research, as well as previous research on interracial relationships, couples consisting of Black men and White women would recount stories of “angry Black women” who harassed them, “rolled their eyes” at them, and were constructed as a “problem.” These stories are the ones most often heard because most studies of Black-White couples consisted of more Black-man/White-woman couplings, given that they are more common than are Black-women/White-man couplings. Similarly, numerous quantitative studies posit Black women as the least accepting of interracial unions. For my work, I was also analyzing media and film images of interracial unions using films such as *Waiting to Exhale* (1995) and *Jungle Fever* (1991), which depict scenes of a group of Black women lamenting the loss of Black men to interracial dating, among other things. From all of these various academic and popular culture sources, the message was clear that Black women are generally opposed to interracial relationships, but very rarely are their own voices actually heard. Instead, at best, their stories have been retold.

## **DIFFERENT FRAMEWORKS OF ANALYSES**

I begin by providing this context because it is an important piece of what my original *Gender and Society* article was about, and how it began firmly grounded in the

tradition of Black feminist theories, such as that of Patricia Hill Collins. My data came from separate focus-group interviews with Black women on three different college campuses in the Northeast, as well as in-depth interviews with a small number of Black women who were interracially married. As Nancy Naples argues, citing feminist scholars Nancy Hartsock and Patricia Hill Collins, respondents' views are best "achieved in community, through collective conversations and dialogue among women in marginal social positions" (Naples 2003, p. 71).

At the opening of "Right to Be Hostile?" Jeffries references my methodology, erroneously stating that I presented myself as both an insider and outsider as a "White woman in a long-term interracial relationship," which I am not. In the methodology section of my article, following the principles of a feminist framework (as well as the suggestions of reviewers), I did reference my own identity as a White Portuguese woman with a multiracial African American/Portuguese son and daughter, noting how this may possibly have affected the research. As feminist and critical race scholars have argued, it is essential for researchers to interrogate the ways that their identity, their respondents' identities, and the fields of research are "raced in ways that are neither unitary nor predictable" (Twine 2000, p. 27).

While pointing to my subjective position, Jeffries avoids acknowledging his own social location. I mention this oversight because I think it speaks to the fundamentally different approaches that Jeffries and I take in analyzing the qualitative data from my research. As is illustrated in Kathryn Waddell Takara's article on Black women in the academy, "A View from the Academic Edge: One Black Woman Who is Dancing as Fast as She Can," one's own understandings and others' responses are always racialized and gendered, albeit not always in the same way.

Reading my *Gender and Society* piece (which I hope that readers of this issue of the *Du Bois Review* will do) and Jeffries's critique highlights how one's focus, perspective, and the sources drawn from can lead to distinctly different analyses. While there may be multiple interpretations and conclusions, I argue that my analysis, both the original article and my commentary here, engages the women's stories and seeks to understand their views, not by disputing their realities, but by analyzing their responses in context. Jeffries's critique centers on his argument that I do not adequately interrogate my respondents' claims about their views on interracial dating, and that I misinterpret racism, prejudice, and the role of class. I reply that Jeffries ignores or dismisses the data provided by the women respondents and weaves in his own story, which ultimately results in his making assumptions about Black women and blaming them for their views and circumstances. Since my original article was meant to spark discussion, I will briefly engage the various points Jeffries argues, noting significant points of disagreement, as well as consensus, in the hope that this debate might lead to further research on these issues. I will also comment briefly on Takara's article, because I think there are many common themes in our work. While there is much overlap, I will discuss three main points: the role of class, the role of racism, and the symbolic meanings of interracial relationships.

## **BLACK WOMEN, CLASS, AND SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED REALITIES**

Jeffries states that I blur "the line between numerical reality and social construction" when I present my respondents' lengthy discussions about not having Black male partners, and how interracial relationships are seen as symbolic of and sometimes responsible for the difficulties they face. He states that I "repeatedly" affirm "subjects' understanding," because he claims that there is a difference between these

Black women's social construction and what he refers to as "objective statistical fact . . . 'demographic realities.'" Jeffries offers two possible explanations of why I describe the Black women respondents' concerns over finding a Black partner as legitimate and realistic: either I did not know the sex ratio, or I was referring to "a specific segment of the Black population," meaning middle-class, educated Black men. There are a number of problems with this argument.

As Takara's piece on Black women in the academy shows, numbers cannot tell the whole story, since just looking at whether there are Black women faculty on college campuses does not tell you what their experiences on campus are. Yet in his privileging of "objective statistical fact," Jeffries references Orlando Patterson's (1998) analysis of census data in which he reports that there is a sex ratio of 105 men for every 100 women, but that does not tell us about the relationship and dating patterns of those men and women. Other scholars, such as Paul Attewell et al. (2006), using the Current Population Survey, found that "there are many very 'marriageable' (African American) women and men . . . who do not live with spouse or partner. Such findings are not explainable within a context of demographic imbalances." Attewell et al. cite various markers such as low-income White men still marrying or cohabiting, the relatively low rates of cohabitation/marriage among Blacks as compared to Whites, and the fact that Black women are far less likely to live with a partner/spouse than are White women, concluding that this is a problem that needs to be explored more. Furthermore, the idea that an *objective reality* exists, or that there is a clear distinction between fact and reality is problematic because it matters whose reality we are referring to. If the U.S. Census Bureau tells us there are Black men available, but three sets of Black women say they can't find them, does that imply these women are wrong or that their responses have no merit? What constitutes an "available" man or what underlies these women's perceived lack of available men may be up for debate, but I privileged their stories precisely because the focus of my article was to document and analyze how they interpret their own situation.

Next Jeffries asserts that "these middle-class Black women are only in the market for straight, middle-class Black men" (Jeffries 2006, p. 451), which is not necessarily supported by my data. Given that I was interested in their views on interracial dating, I did not directly ask about what they were looking for in a partner, though their responses did touch on such issues. In terms of the race/class debate and where my work stands, I agree with Jeffries that class plays a significant role, but, based on my research, I cannot make the claim that they these Black women were "only" looking for men of a certain socioeconomic class status. Jeffries repeatedly asserts that these "Black women are deeply invested in building strong partnerships with privileged Black men" (Jeffries 2006, p. 459), though his confidence in this claim must come from somewhere other than my data. Also problematic is that Jeffries never explicates what he is basing these assertions on.

In my study, a few women actually made reference to men whom they were currently dating and who were not in college and were from their home neighborhood or an area surrounding the college. These men were not middle class, and class differences were never presented as a problem. Jeffries argues that I needed to "highlight the class dimension of this story." However, while class undoubtedly has an effect, socioeconomic class status was not one of the main issues that emerged from my research. Furthermore, the relationship between socioeconomic class status and these women's views on interracial relationships is more complicated than Jeffries acknowledges. For example, though I interviewed women currently in college, my respondents were not all middle-class; they came from different socioeconomic backgrounds but had similar views on interracial relationships. Since the perceived

lack of Black male partners was an important piece of the women's responses, it is relevant to note that, across class backgrounds, Black women marry, or live partnered, less than do women of other races, with more-educated Black women being the most likely to be married or living with a partner (Attewell et al., 2006). Given these myriad complexities, this is certainly an area that should be studied in more depth, with a particular emphasis on Black women from different class backgrounds and explicit questions about the race and socioeconomic status of the partners they desire.

Most importantly, Jeffries revises and retells the respondents' stories in a way that does not reflect their experiences. These women's responses are social constructions, as are all ideas and beliefs about race, yet that does not mean that their views are not relevant. Regardless of how many men are available or marriageable based on census reports or other surveys, the women whom I interviewed on three different college campuses expressed similar beliefs and reflections regarding their dating prospects. I would argue that just because there are Black men does not mean they are available to these women as partners. Furthermore, by focusing on statistics and privileging census data over the experience of themselves, Jeffries moves away from the point of my article, which is to present their voices and to attempt to understand their perspectives in depth, rather than simply accepting the one-sided assumptions about these women that emerge from other sources. Unfortunately, Jeffries makes other assumptions about these women—that they are middle class and only want middle-class men—and he also attacks the women's views. While obviously there are different interpretations, this debate clearly points to the need for future studies to look more closely at these issues, using data *from* Black women, not just *about* them.

## BLACK WOMEN, RACISM, AND WHITE MEN

Jeffries also finds fault with my theorizing on racism and Black women's views on interracial dating. He argues that I do not clearly explicate *White racism*, do not discuss the role of Black prejudice, and do not critically engage the women's responses on what interracial dating means to them. Jeffries offers an alternate reading of my research, relying on the distinguished work of Glenn Loury, Lawrence Bobo, Orlando Patterson, and William Julius Wilson. In contrast, I analyzed the women's responses by grounding my study in the works of Black feminist scholars from different disciplines, including Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, and Toni Morrison, whose works resonate with the voices of the women I interviewed.

Jeffries also disagrees with the Black women's responses on interracial dating and interprets their views as indicative of Black prejudice, which he says I "allowed to fall outside the presumed definition of racism, without the needed analytic justification" (Jeffries 2006, p. 454). Yet Jeffries never clearly defines Black prejudice, nor what about the women's responses represents Black prejudice, except for referencing one woman's comment that her mother "just doesn't trust White people." In the context of the group discussions, the women expressed opposition to interracial relationships and, to a lesser extent, a hesitation or cautionary approach to interacting closely with Whites, based on past experiences. Based on my extensive analysis of the data, all of which I could not include in the article, these women did not offer ideas about White inferiority or undesirability, but rather discussed their experiences and beliefs about how White people treated and thought about Black people. To charge these women with Black prejudice not only minimizes the extent of White racism, but also does not fit the data from my study.

Jeffries complains that I did not "map the range of factors that influence Black women's construction of their dating pool," and that instead I fixated on racism. I am

unclear as to why Jeffries minimizes or ignores the value of the women's responses, and then proceeds to characterize my analysis and affirmation of their views as a "fixation" or "shortcoming." In my analysis of the women's responses, the pattern that emerged was that these women discussed how they experience racism and discrimination *daily, in so many ways*, and that this has shaped how they view interracial relationships. Given that there are limited issues that can be covered in any one article, I focused on larger structural issues such as racism to *explain* the responses of the Black women I interviewed, along the lines of Takara, who concentrates on "the institutional features of the academy which help to explain the particularly bad situation of Black females in the academy" (Takara 2006, p. 463). Scholars such as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Patricia Hill Collins, and Joe Feagin have underscored the importance of looking at *racism*, rather than individual prejudice, because it allows us to see how racial inequality is structured into the fabric of society and has a significant effect on the daily interactions of individual people.

Jeffries does acknowledge that "institutional racism explains why the pool of Black men is small, and this racism makes the conditions of partnering different for Black women than they are for White women" (Jeffries 2006, p. 452). Yet he does not acknowledge that racism plays a role in the opportunities Black women may have, which may influence their preference for Black men, such as the lack of White men who want to date Black women and the perceived number of Black men who exclusively seek the White women whom the women interviewed reference. Throughout his critique, Jeffries seems unwilling to consider the women's realities as the subjects presented them. Instead he states:

This particular resource, suitable partners, is only limited because the group has built a story of self that constructs the resource as scarce by starting from the premise that the only suitable partners are middle-class Black men, and that by virtue of their race alone, Black women deserve middle-class Black men more than non-Blacks do (Jeffries 2006, p. 456).

Furthermore, Jeffries applies Loury's "logic of self-confirming stereotypes," arguing that Black women assume that White men prefer to date White women so they "refuse to investigate the possibility of relationships across racial lines," and, therefore, the rate of White men/Black women unions remain low. In these comments, Jeffries scolds Black women for having a preference for Black men, and he does not acknowledge that the devaluation of Blackness and White feminine standards of beauty better explain the dearth of White men/Black women unions than do Black women's "self-confirming stereotypes." Jeffries points to the role of racism in limiting the opportunities of Black men, thereby decreasing the pool of successful Black men, but he does not seem as willing to acknowledge how racism actually affects Black women. While criticizing my analysis for focusing on the role of White racism, Jeffries's analysis accuses the Black women of prejudice, which he argues is the main source of the problem. As Patricia Hill Collins argues, some scholars "elevat[e] male suffering above that of Black women . . . (and) cannot envision a situation in which African American women and men are differently and equally harmed" (Collins 2004, p. 60).

Missing from Jeffries's critique is any sustained discussion of the data from my interviews with Black women who are interracially married, which I included to explore the complexity of views on interracial relationships among Black women. In this section, the women discuss their views on interracial relationships and their experiences of being interracially married. One of these women, Gwen, a college

professor happily married to a White man and significantly older than the college women interviewed, articulated similar understandings of what Black men's choices to partner with a White woman signified to her and other Black women. In a lengthy discussion, she states that she used to believe interracial unions were a form of "selling out," that she works hard to overcome this concern among other Black colleagues, and she still knows many Black men who are married interracially who have done whatever they can to "lighten their gene pool." The women such as Gwen whom I interviewed (including those interracially married and the groups of college women), reference being characterized as "aggressive," "too controlling," and "nasty gold-diggers," not only by Whites, but also by some Black men. For these reasons, I situated my analysis within the myriad discussions of how Black women have been constructed, imagined, and treated.

The enduring stereotypes of Blackness as deviant, immoral, angry, inferior, stupid, lazy, and sexually promiscuous have been well documented across disciplines. As Paula Giddings has shown, Black women have been physically and emotionally abused by Whites who project them as sexually promiscuous, emasculating, and unfeminine, and Black women have also been blamed for problems of Black families and Black men. For example, Calvin C. Hernton (1966 [1988]), Frantz Fanon (1967), and William Grier and Price Cobbs (1968) describe the ways that relationships with White women felt, and how Black women were different and/or prevented the relationships (Giddings 1984, pp. 318–324). As Shirley Hill explains, "Most efforts by Black women to embrace the traditions that arise from their cultural, material, and gender experiences are rebuffed by White society as reflecting class deficits, sexual promiscuity, a lack of self-discipline, or behaviors that are detrimental to health and well-being" (Hill 2005, p. 100).

Like Takara's article, which eloquently shows how stereotypes about Black women affect their interactions, their treatment, and their experiences in academia, my study includes women's voices on interracial relationships as a testament to how inequalities of race and gender disadvantage Black women and, even worse, are used against them when they try to speak out. It is within this context that I consider why the Black women I interviewed spent most of the time discussing relationships between Black men and White women.

## **BLACK WOMEN AND SYMBOLIC MEANINGS OF INTERRACIAL RELATIONSHIPS**

My interview questions equally covered interracial dating between Black women and White men, and between Black men and White women, but the women whom I interviewed focused on the latter, which offers important insight into how this issue affects them personally. The women described interracial dating between Black men and White women as a "phenomenon" which impacted them significantly and tended to occur in particular ways, especially on the college campus. Jeffries states that, "Middle-class Black women in Childs's study consider interracial dating treasonous, and are angry that middle-class Black men occasionally choose White women as partners" (Jeffries 2006, p. 459). From my standpoint, "proving" the women's accuracy in how frequently these relationships occurred and what the actual dynamics of the relationships were—in effect judging the women's beliefs—was far less important than analyzing what their responses told us about their own experiences. Jeffries calls the respondents' views on Black men who interracially date "misguided," and he ignores that these women are profoundly affected by interracial relationships because

of what it *symbolizes* to them. The women describe how Black men choosing White women symbolizes a rejection of Blackness in general, and Black women in particular, pointing to an internalization of racism, which privileges Whiteness and White women. To the women, there is a clear connection between White racism (which devalues Blackness) and Black men who choose White women. Jeffries disagrees with the women, asserting that “Partnering White women as the ultimate measure of this internalization is on much shakier ground” (Jeffries 2006, p. 453). Jeffries offers his own definition of the significance and meaning of interracial relationships, but he does not identify what he bases his definition on, and it is certainly *not* based on my data. He outlines what he believes is the political significance of interracial relationships and takes issue with the women’s characterization of Black men who date interracially as “sell-outs,” quipping, “If Clarence Thomas and Condoleezza Rice were to partner, it is unlikely that Blacks, or any other group, would mark their union as a landmark moment in either Black political progress or social justice” (Jeffries 2006, p. 453). What Jeffries fails to recognize is that these women are commenting on how they see choosing a White woman as a symbolic rejection of them as Black women. For example, Bill Cosby, despite his attacks on Black communities, was mentioned by one woman interviewed as being valued for his long-lasting marriage to a Black woman.

By reducing the women’s views to having a problem with Black men and White women dating “at a rate that is too frequent for Black women’s taste,” Jeffries characterizes the women in the same way that interracial couples in previous studies did, as petty and jealous. Furthermore, many of the women did discuss personal acceptance of individual couples whom they knew, particularly those in which the White partner did not fit the model of White racism that they had expected, or the Black partner maintained a strong commitment to Black communities, especially in the case of Black women married to White men. I would argue that the women’s views, supported by the works of diverse scholars from Patricia Hill Collins, Patricia Williams, Angela Davis, bell hooks, Toni Morrison, and Paula Giddings, are about much more than Black women’s “taste” or preference. They also reflect the racialized and gendered experiences of Black women in all realms of society, from the dating scene to the college campus. Mapping theories of racial prejudice onto their responses detracts from and diminishes the reality of the institutionalized nature of racism.

This also ties in with Jeffries’s critique of the respondents’ ideas about racialized body parts and racial preferences. Some women did offer essentialist ideas about differences in body types, such as White women having little or no backsides and the associated belief that this is what White men prefer, a conclusion they arrived at through their experiences with White men. I certainly did not overlook the significance of these beliefs, nor the history of the fascination with Black women’s buttocks ranging from Sarah Baartman to modern-day attention to the backsides of women of color such as Beyoncé Knowles and Jennifer Lopez (Collins 2004).

I offer substantive commentary on how the idea of racial difference persists, with White women and Black women being characterized in complete opposition to one another, and with White women still viewed as the standard of femininity in terms of not only physical appearance but also personal characteristics such as submissiveness (twisting the historical construction of the White woman as virgin and the Black woman as whore, while still serving the same purpose, that of keeping White women the most desirable). Jeffries focuses on the women’s generalizations about Black men and Whites, but he does not address the way these women feel stereotyped and devalued. He dismisses the Black women’s responses by stating that they “suggest that White people are liars and cast Black women as those with large behinds, [so] it is reasonable to suspect that subjects’ understandings of racial essences influence the

meanings they give to interracial interaction” (Jeffries 2006, p. 454). Beyond the fact that Jeffries erroneously accuses these women of calling White people liars, all of us are affected by racialized images and beliefs, whether we believe them, fight them, or engage them in some other way. I presented the women’s discussion of White men not being attracted to Black women because of body type, skin color, and attitude, because it reflects the power of these images, *even though they are socially constructed*.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, rather than assume, as Jeffries does, that the Black women are ignorant of how ideas about body type have been used against them, I read the women’s responses regarding why White men don’t date Black women, at least on some level, as a strategy of reclaiming their own definition of beauty and value, even if they feel some Whites and some Black men do not agree. Collins discusses the contradictions of racialized stereotypes and “Black women’s agency concerning the use of their bodies” (Collins 2004, pp. 27–28), which is exemplified by one of my respondents, who during the discussion looked to her backside and remarked, “White guys here wouldn’t know what to do with all of this.” Reading Jeffries’s critique alone, such important nuances are lost.

## SOLUTIONS: BACK TO THE BEGINNING

My motivation for this work came out of the silencing of Black women’s voices in the literature on interracial relationships, and, ironically, Jeffries repeatedly accuses me of just this: “affirming my subjects’ moral authority,” which is an important part of feminist research. While Jeffries dismisses the women in my study as “furious with the ideal of White femininity,” and as having “their sense of self-worth . . . inextricably tied to being the object of a man’s desire,” I argue, in contrast, that these women are frustrated with a *society* (not individual couples) that devalues their worth and constantly reminds them of this, never more painfully than when Black men couple with White women. Jeffries ends by stating that it “is unclear from the data and her analysis what would constitute improvement for either the subjects or the author, short of banning Black male/White female partnerships” (Jeffries 2006, p. 450). Jeffries simultaneously argues that I do not offer any clear solutions, and that, by focusing on the underlying racism that exists, I leave Black women trapped. Yet Jeffries’s solution is essentially to blame Black women, arguing that in order for Black women to improve their situation, they need to adopt a less “Black” and “womanly” policy by pursuing nonbourgeois or non-Black men, placing the burden squarely on Black women’s choices. I agree there are no easy solutions, yet I ended my article with quotes from Collins about “demand[ing] changing the ‘circumstances that create the pain’” and rising above the blame, which Jeffries unfortunately only contributes to. Yet I am unclear as to why Jeffries equates my discussion of institutional and structural processes of racism and sexism that impact individual and group decisions (which cannot be explained by metastereotypes) with positioning only Black women in a dire strait from which they cannot escape. Given that Black women have had to continually confront being made the problem, it is empowering, not immobilizing, to have research document that this is a problem that they deal with, but did not create and cannot be held solely responsible for. Ultimately, Jeffries’s analysis silences the women’s voices, by doubting their realities, dismissing their views, and blaming them, which brings us back to where my research began. I hope that this debate illustrates the need to conduct empirical research with Black women, to hear their voices, and to provide analyses that reflect Black women’s experiences and not the dominant stories that we have become so accustomed to.

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## NOTE

1. In my larger work, *Navigating Interracial Borders* (2005), which included interviews with White communities, White male college students on three different campuses offered some variation on not being attracted to Black women, citing lack of physical attraction or cultural differences.

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