

Sexual Agency of Afro-Descendant Women in the Diaspora

Vanessa Aciro Apira, Class of 2021

This project was an expansive and exploratory study of how Afro-Descendant women's sexual agency expresses itself throughout the diaspora. While touching on some works by Afro-descendant women outside of the United States of America, I decided to center my reading to the United States of America, given the need for historical grounding. Through a robust collection of texts from Black Feminist Academics, American Black Women's accounts, and the podcasts by Black female sex educators, doulas, and sex workers, I started to make connections between slavery, miscegenation law enforcement, religion, dating, sex work, and contemporary music.

During slavery in the United States, enslaved Black women were treated as their masters' property and, as such, forced into sexual and marital relationships with either or both their masters and black men. As pathways to freeing oneself emerged, the selection or strategic influence of a romantic partner became one way for Black women to work toward agency (bodily and financially). Though eventually manifesting as marriages and therefore mirroring 'normal' romances, these types of relationships involved actively subverting the construction of romance and transgressing the social bonds of marriage. In my project, I learned that such subversions and transgressions never ceased due to continued systematic racism, notions of white supremacy, and sexism. Also, the rise of respectability politics and dependence on religion further complicated American Afro-descendant women's access to sexual liberation or agency.

The further I dove into my research, the more I became interested in how the construction of romantic relationships for American Black Women is influenced by the history of slavery in the United States. I separated and focused on two types of romantic arrangements: monogamous heterosexual romantic relationships (aimed at ending in marriage) and paid companionships (sugar babies, escorts, and some other forms of sex work). I looked for black women's views on how both ought to operate and how they aid or limit the American Black woman. By looking at these two romantic arrangements, I untangled how they serve as strategies for dealing with patriarchy, race, and class under capitalism.

The Black women within both roles (sugar baby, escort, etc. and girlfriend/wife) are required to perform romance and devotion to men, which calls for emotional, physical, and psychological labor. Despite being separated by how women get paid for their labor, I was deeply interested in how they intersected and influenced each other. Sites of intersection and influence included Black Feminist Academic's recognition of the aforementioned requirements as labor and labor worthy of financial compensation, Black sex workers recounting Black Feminists thought when talking about their companionship practices, and the mainstream proliferation of contemporary music made by current or ex-sex workers that promotes the theories of Black sex workers.

Upon discovering Deniz Kandiyoti's essay, *Bargaining with Patriarchy*, I revealed in the view that the two forms of romantic and sexual maneuvering reveal and define blueprints called patriarchal bargains. Despite which bargain the American Black woman chooses, neither allows her to entirely escape the concrete social constraints of living in a racist, sexist, and capitalist America. However, these bargains present Black Women with modes of operating aimed at optimizing their gains and agency within an oppressive system.

Faculty Mentor: Professor Jenifer Scanlon

Funded by the: Surdna Foundation Undergraduate Research Fellowship Program