**Mississippi Revisited: Sex and Sexuality as Experienced by Young Women Living in Mississippi**

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I grew up as a young woman in Jackson, Mississippi. I always felt that I was perhaps more aware of the patriarchal tendencies embedded in white Southern culture than other white Southern women were. However, it wasn’t until I deepened my study in the sociological realm that I learned I was only beginning to understand just how intricately these beliefs are woven into the childhoods of southern kids. I previously specified “white Southern culture” as a way of acknowledging that the systems that shaped my experience were not universal in a place as continuously and deeply racialized as Mississippi. Though white Southern culture dominates the narrative in Mississippi, there are a myriad of other narratives that deserve attention. For an example, one need look no further than the imprints of the colonial patriarchy that have deeply affected the Black community in the South. And ultimately, with *de jure* segregation abolished only fifty years ago, these imprints have evolved on a historical path separate from that of the white community. These larger realities, in conversation with my coursework, led me to my central research question: how do young women growing up in rural Mississippi come to understand their own sexuality and bodily autonomy? What inputs shape that understanding? How do those understandings differ along racial boundaries, and in what ways is sexuality deeply racialized and classed? What is the status of queerness among women in the South and within rural Southern families? And, perhaps most importantly, how do those understandings dictate how young Mississippian women of different racial and class backgrounds move throughout the world?

The issues I aim to understand are certainly broad and could appear somewhat abstract. I am still working on weaving together the many social realities I stumbled upon, but ultimately, I came to a couple concrete conclusions by way of a couple different data-collection methods. I began by conducting semi-structured interviews. I was able to connect with a sizable pool of interviewees by taking advantage of my pre-existing network before “snowballing” outward to make connections within their networks. This has provided me with a large amount of qualitative data to sift through. I also spent the summer launching a survey to compliment my interviews with more quantitative findings. As I’m pursuing an Honors Thesis using this research, both interviews and survey response collection will remain ongoing until I’m ready to start my writing process.

 I had an incredible time interviewing young women from around Mississippi. I ended up being able to reflect on my own experience in this state and how different societal structures shaped my understanding of sex and sexuality. My data overwhelmingly pointed to the shortcomings of sex education across the state in both overt and nuanced ways. Many of my respondents learned to fear the “delicacy” of their bodies, and white women most frequently reported feeling this way. Religion played a huge part in my research as well, with 94.6% of my pool noting that religion played a strong role in their childhood. A few women spoke eloquently about the gendered systems they internalized from their religious upbringings, and some rejected those systems while others found empowerment within them. Above all of this, though, I was fascinated by the concept of agentic sexuality. According to their particular social identities, each respondent located an avenue within their sexuality through which to assert agency. This came in the form of abstaining from sex, flirting but not engaging, having no set guidelines at all, and more. The dismal state of sex education in Mississippi leads many, including myself, to assume that the possibilities of sexual expression are equally limited, but in reality, the women that grow up here adapt in any way that they can.

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