Black “Tops” and Asian “Bottoms”: The Impact of Race and Gender on Coupling in Queer Communities

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In this Essay, I make two main points. First, I call for a focus on the impact of structural conditions on preferences regarding intimacy. We tend to think our preferences are natural and fixed when in fact they may be more plastic and susceptible to structural influences than we imagine. In order to illustrate this theme, I examine a few structures that channel our preferences, namely racial screening mechanisms on internet dating websites and sex segregation in queer social spaces. Second, I provide a warning against uncritical celebrations of increasing interracial intimacy as a sign of reduced prejudice and social progress. Our celebrations should be tempered by the awareness that race structures even our most intimate relationships. Although two people have crossed racial lines and may have even committed to spending their lives together, we cannot easily conclude that they have “transcended race.” Because race and gender intersect to determine an individual’s value in the romantic marketplace, the two partners are unlikely to be similarly situated in terms of their options for leaving the relationship should it become unhappy. For instance, black heterosexual men enjoy greater options for interracial coupling than do black heterosexual women.¹ Further, people of color who are in interracial relationships may have to suffer racialized microaggressions in order to

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¹See Kellina M. Craig-Henderson, Black Men in Interracial Relationships: What’s Love Got to Do With It? 5 (2006) (“Today, Black men are more than twice as likely as Black women to be involved in an interracial relationship.”).
maintain the relationship. Yet these subtle insults may escape the awareness of the white partner in the relationship, who might not intend to cause any harm or see the comments as racially offensive. One source of such racialized harms is likely to arise from racial disagreements in perceiving discrimination. Because black and white people tend to view allegations of discrimination through fundamentally different lenses, they are likely to disagree as to the existence of discrimination even when they are in an intimate relationship.

I. THE INFLUENCE OF STRUCTURE

A. Race, Segregation and the Numbers Game

Law and social norms create structures that channel and limit our interaction with people of various identities. This structuring of our social environments determines, in part, the romantic possibilities and inclinations we imagine, express and pursue. However, the presence of such structures and their influence on our romantic choices is often overlooked. People often report that they “just like what they like,” expressing little awareness of the structural influences that might account for their preferences.²

Residential segregation is a primary influence on romantic preferences.³ For many, living and/or working in a neighborhood or workplace in which one race predominates makes it difficult to connect romantically with a person of a different race. As a race-conscious African-American who is often in predominantly white settings,

² Consider the following examples from an article on Asian-white interracial dating. “‘I’m just not attracted to Asian guys,’’ says Reesa, a 32-year-old Filipina American who lives in Northern California. ‘I don’t know why. I just never have been. I’ve just always dated white or European guys.’” Tony, a Japanese-American man interviewed for the same article, says: “‘I’ve never been attracted to Asian women. . . . My type is a blonde-haired girl. . . . Blondes have caught my eye for some reason.’” http://www.audreymagazine.com/Sep2005/Features03.asp, 2–3 (last visited Apr. 19, 2007).
residential segregation has impacted my romantic preferences in a more complex fashion. I grew up in a mostly-white neighborhood in the Midwest and attended a mostly-white religious school. As an upper-middle class adult professional, I continued to find myself in mostly-white environments, where similarly situated black partners were few and far between. Although my parents raised me to prefer blacks (women, that is), it was difficult to act on this preference since I was often in work and social settings that offered few options in terms of black romantic partners. The pickings became even slimmer once I identified as queer. Consider the numbers game: A heterosexual white person who lives in a mostly-white neighborhood and wants to date only white people faces few limitations. If, say, 80% of the neighborhood is white, almost half of that number (either the male or female half) is available for partnering. Even if 10% of the whites identify as gay or lesbian (a generous assumption), the white heterosexual still has ample options for same-race partnering. The black heterosexual, by contrast, is limited to half of the black population, which is 20% of the community. Black heterosexual women are likely to face a further disadvantage—and black heterosexual men, a corresponding advantage—because of the sex ratio imbalance in black populations in the U.S. In part because of the mass incarceration of black men, the number of eligible black women significantly outstrips that of eligible black male partners.

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4 See Brad Sears, *Diff’rent Strokes*, VILL. VOICE, June 17, 2005 (citing statistics suggesting that there are 6 million queer-identified Americans and 281 million heterosexual-identified Americans).
5 This stylized scenario assumes that only blacks and whites exist in the neighborhood or that, to the extent that Asians, Latinos, and Native Americans are included, the black person has a preference for blacks rather than all people of color.
7 *Id.* at S118 (stating that “the shortage of [black] men places [black] women at a disadvantage in negotiating and maintaining mutually monogamous relationships, because men can easily find another relationship if they perceive their primary relationship to be problematic”).
The romantic market for the black queer man is even worse. He is subject to the same diminution of the black male population that impacts black women. Yet he also is limited to the fraction of black men who engage in sex with men. If he identifies as openly gay and prefers to date only other openly gay black men, his market is further reduced because black men appear less likely than white men to identify as gay.\(^8\) He may choose to deal with men who have sex with men but do not identify as gay or queer, yet if he is seeking a long-term committed relationship, this may very well be an exercise in frustration. The preferences of an out black professional who lives and works in predominantly white settings are thus impinged by at least three structural constraints that do not similarly restrict white gay men: (1) his racial group is in the minority; (2) men of his race are less likely to identify as openly gay, which may make it harder to spot and connect with black men who have sex with men; and (3) there is a substantially smaller proportion of black men who are not incarcerated or otherwise under the supervision of the criminal justice system and would be eligible in terms of having a similar educational and socioeconomic background.

Looking back at my own romantic trajectory, I can now see how place and structure, and the specific aforementioned structural constraints, have influenced my

\(^8\) According to one CDC study of young men in six major cities, 18% of black men who have sex with men reported that they did not disclose their sexuality generally, while just 8% of white men failed to disclose. See Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, HIV/STD Risks in Young Men who Have Sex with Men who Do Not Disclose their Sexual Orientation-Six U.S. Cities. 1994-2000. 52 MORBIDITY AND MORTALITY WEEKLY REPORT, 81, 81 (2003). The survey was conducted during 1994-2000 and focused on men aged 15-29 who lived in Baltimore, Dallas, L.A., Miami, New York, Seattle and attended a MSM-identified venue. See id. at 82. Other men of color were also less likely to disclose than whites.

There are a number of reasons why some black men do not identify with the term “gay,” which I explore more fully in a forthcoming work. Although homophobia in the black community is often cited as the sole explanation for black men not identifying as gay or bisexual, a more in-depth analysis reveals that other factors include white exclusion of blacks in the representational arena, see Devon W. Carbado, Black Rights, Gay Rights, Civil Rights, 47 UCLA L. REV. 1467 (2000), other expressions of racism in the gay community, such as policies excluding blacks from access to gay clubs, and the erasure of bisexuality so that any man who admits having had sex with a man is automatically classified as gay.
choices. The pivotal development in my decision to come out was my move from Los Angeles to Washington, D.C. While clerking at the Ninth Circuit, I lived in Pasadena, a small, mostly-white suburb north of L.A. I did not discern a significant gay community in Pasadena, which made it easy for me to avoid attending to my own growing interest in men. Occasionally, I would hang out in West Hollywood with a fellow law clerk who lived there. “Weho,” as they call it, is of course very visibly gay. But it is also overwhelmingly white, and the performances of gay identity that I saw there struck me as strange and inaccessible. I do not recall being approached by men (white, black, or other) or meeting anyone that I wanted to date. Moreover, I quickly learned that the black men in these spaces were not looking for another black man. They were in this white-dominated neighborhood, in most cases, because they wanted to date white men. I could not relate because I neither preferred white men nor did I think I was the “type” of black man typically preferred by white men. Another factor that alienated me from others was my feeling that I did not have much in common with the black, white and other men in West Hollywood, because of the centrality of their sexual identity and immersion in a

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9 Another structural aspect of many large urban environments is the “gay neighborhood.” Many view these communities as “natural,” although they are fairly recent innovations and, according to a recent NEW YORK TIMES article, there are signs that they are dying in part because they do not resonate with younger generations of queer people. Such enclaves are usually gay male dominated. The number of lesbian public spaces is typically dwarfed by the numerous opportunities for men to meet and mate. The separation of spaces by gender within the LGBT community—and the broader demarcation of “straight” and “gay” meeting places—are structures that implicate romantic preferences. Studies show that despite labels suggesting that people are entirely monosexual, a significant number of self-identified gay men and lesbians express sexual attraction to people of a different sex and sometimes act on it. See, e.g., [CITE]. Rigid separation of men and women into distinct sex-designated spaces frustrates the potential for sexuality to develop in ways that do not neatly map onto our artificial sexual categories. See Michael Ross, et al., Concordance of Sexual Behavior/Identity in Street Outreach Samples of Four Racial/Ethnic Groups, 30 SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASES 110 (2003). In this way, structures that are said to facilitate sexual liberation may actually stunt it.

10 See Russell K. Robinson, Uncovering Covering, 101 NW. U. L. REV. 1809 (2007) (discussing social pressure on men of color in white gay spaces to play up racial stereotypes such as black hypermasculinity and Asian passivity); Voon Chin Phua, & Gayle Kaufman, The Crossroads of Race and Sexuality: Date Selection Among Men in Internet “Personal” Ads, 24 J. FAMILY ISSUES 981, 992 (2003) (“Preferences for minorities are often tinted with stereotypical images: Asians as exotic, docile, loyal partners; Hispanics as passionate, fiery lovers; and Blacks as ‘well-endowed,’ forbidden partners.”).
particular sexual culture. By contrast, my sexual identity almost always seems less relevant to me than my racial identity. These differences made it easier to avoid acknowledging what I did have in common with these men—we all desired to have sex with men.

After my Ninth Circuit clerkship, I accepted a job at the Office of Legal Counsel in the Department of Justice, which required a move to Washington, D.C., a city I did not expect to like. However, D.C. provided precisely what West Hollywood lacked. For the first time in my life, I was surrounded by attractive black men on a regular basis: when walking down the street, riding the metro and going to the gym. These men seemed like me, and some of them seemed to like me, instead of preferring white men. The exposure to a more diverse and relatable gay community prompted me to recognize my sexuality, finally act on it and ultimately reconfigure my identity. Although I have since learned that similar black men exist in L.A., the structure of the city, with racially distinct communities separated by long, intractable freeway rides, made them largely invisible to me at the time and delayed my romantic development.

B. Internet Design and Romantic Preferences

A structure of increasing importance in romantic marketplaces is the Internet.11 This is especially the case in cities like L.A. where online personals sites can help people navigate the city’s unwieldy landscape. When I moved back to L.A., I turned to the Internet to find the black men that had largely eluded me during my first stint in L.A. During that first stay, I was unaware that the Internet was emerging as a primary means

11 For an enlightening overview of racial discrimination and the Internet, see Jerry Kang, Cyber-Race, 113 HARV. L. REV. 1130 (2000).
of connecting men who have sex with men (“MSM”). When I moved to the wealthy, predominantly white West Side of the city, the Internet created opportunities for me to interact with men in Inglewood, Compton, or Long Beach, men I would almost certainly not meet randomly while going through my daily routine on the West Side.

Even as the Internet increases romantic opportunity, it also channels interactions, either making it easier or more difficult for us to avoid those who are inconsistent with our perceived preferences. Like many dating websites, www.match.com (“Match”) prompts the user to indicate which races he will and will not date. Match’s search engine asks the user which of nine alphabetically-organized “ethnicities” he will date. Interestingly, this part of the search engine is listed under the heading “Background/Values,” which implies a conflation of racial ancestry/appearance and certain moral or cultural “values.” Because these search engines facilitate racial discrimination (which may or may not be problematic, as I discuss further below), if a white user is interested only in white romantic partners, he can easily structure his screen so that he never even has to view non-white profiles.

Website designers face a range of options regarding eliciting and managing racial information. Subtle structural differences in design might very well influence the likelihood that the user expresses and acts on a racial preference. If the site wanted to obstruct or at least discourage racial discrimination, it could eliminate race from the criteria that people may use to conduct searches. This move would track the proposal I made in the context of casting film.\textsuperscript{12} In an article considering the legal implications of race and sex discrimination in the casting process, I argued that casting decision makers

should avoid including race and sex classifications in casting announcements (unless the nature of the storyline requires the actor to appear as a particular race and/or sex). Declining to use race to screen people at the outset of the casting process, or when a user is initially constructing a pool of potential dates, does not mean that people must be colorblind. But it does require them to see the people who do not fit their preconceived notions of what “black” people or “white” people are like. As a result of this expanded pool of options, many people might very well find that the racial stereotypes that guide their racial preferences are unfounded, or at least that there are plenty of people who they perceive as exceptions to the stereotype.

There is a spectrum of policies for managing racial information and racial preferences, ranging from those that heighten the salience of race to those that attempt to obscure it. For example, while Match requires users searching the site to check a box saying they will date a particular race, a website could presumptively include all races in a search and make the user deselect each race that he will not date. A stronger structural intervention would be choosing not to ask questions about race at all when prompting users to establish their profiles. A site might ask a user’s height and neighborhood, but not her race. How many people, I wonder, would write race into their profile if the website administrators did not prompt them to think about race? An even stronger policy against racial discrimination in dating would involve the administrators monitoring text submitted by users in order to purge it of racial references, as www.craigslist.org appears to do with respect to racial preferences in housing. This policy still would not eliminate race because most sites permit users to post self-photographs. Yet photographs, when

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13 See id.
14 See http://www.craigslist.org/about/FHA.html.
untethered to a racial classification and the various performative aspects that constitute race (talk, walk, clothing, etc.), might very well fail to provide conclusive evidence of race. Although many people think that race is obvious and biological, there is tremendous racial variation in the physical features among the people grouped under the umbrella of a particular “race.” Moreover, the first and sometimes only view of a potential date on most websites, including Match, is a small “thumbnail” photograph, which may not disclose all the features necessary in order for a user to discern race. On some sex-oriented websites, including www.adam4adam.com (“A4A”), a popular gay website, many users (who may have sex with men but do not necessarily identify as “gay”) do not post public face photographs. Because sex is often, but not always, the focus, many users post public photographs such as a naked torso, a penis, and/or buttocks. Under these circumstances, the racial classification may provide necessary evidence for a user to distinguish whites from light-skinned Latinos, and Latinos from blacks, for instance. Hence, without the assistance of racial classifications, users might initially be drawn to photographs of some people who do not “look black” or “look Latino” and yet are. At the same time, some users might avoid whites with olive skin and curly hair because they are perceived to be non-white. In this way, the intervention would scramble racial perception and racial preferences. Users might arrange to meet people without knowing for certain that person’s racial background. Indeed, they might enter romantic relationships based on a misapprehension of the other person’s race. In this way, websites would facilitate interracial interactions that might not otherwise occur.

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Match automatically generates “matches”: people whose profiles it says are compatible. When I signed up for Match years ago, I frequently opened the weekly email from this site to find that several of the people the site selected as my “matches” (many white, but some black or otherwise of color) were perfect for me in every way…except they did not check the box saying they would date blacks. In writing this Essay, I signed up for Match again simply to see whether the same pattern would appear, and once again the site proffered “matches” who did not want to date blacks. Beyond the bizarre design of the software, which both established an infrastructure for expressing racial preferences and then ignored those preferences in notifying me about my ostensible matches, I found it depressing to get weekly reminders of the romantic aversion that many people of all races continue to feel toward black people. However, on the flip side of these emails, I wonder if Match sent my profile to the men who said they did not want to date blacks. If so, it would be expanding the pool of potential dates, contrary to the user’s preference, and subtly encouraging them at least to consider black people.

Over time, the geography of L.A. and the structure of certain internet sites subtly shifted my racial preferences. When living in D.C. and later New York City, by and large I did not look at white men as potential romantic partners because of the ample and visible supply of black MSM in these urban centers and an upbringing that encouraged me to seek a black partner. Upon returning to L.A., and dealing with the end of my long-term relationship with a black New Yorker, I initially sought out black men as I would have in New York. I quickly learned, however, that the number of black men on the websites that I frequented was smaller than the number of whites, Latinos and others.

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17 See, e.g., Phua, & Kaufman, supra note 10, at 984 (study of Yahoo personal ads finding that users were least likely to express a preference for blacks).
Thus, I began to widen my search and open myself to the possibility of dating a white man. This new openness resulted in a handful of dates with white men but no real connections. Moreover, I noticed a racial trend in my correspondence on the Internet. It seemed that my introductory emails to black men were more likely to be returned than those sent to white men. Although I never empirically tested the response rate, I would estimate that for every ten emails I sent to white men, I received three replies, while I received replies from seven out of ten black men. It also seemed that the black men were more likely to want to meet me immediately while the white men’s responses tended to be ambivalent and mainly exploratory. In response to these market dynamics, I eventually returned to a focus on black men because attempting to connect with white men seemed less likely to result in an enduring connection. I suspect that people take such expectations into account in many contexts when considering whether or not to approach someone. For instance, whether one is at a bar or the grocery store, attempting to strike up a conversation with an attractive stranger is risky and intimidating to many because we fear rejection and humiliation. If one thinks that white men are more likely to reject him than black men, it would make sense to target black men and perhaps set a higher threshold for approaching white men such as requiring them to be very attractive or waiting for them to signal an interest before approaching.\footnote{Cf. Phua, & Kaufman, supra note 10, at 984 (suggesting that men of color may expect white men not to be interested unless their profile says “all races are welcomed” or “race doesn’t matter”).}

Although few might think it problematic that dating websites facilitate racial preferences, I believe we should think more critically about such facilitation and not quickly conclude that law is powerless to impact these structures. As I have outlined above, whether structural interventions are legally compelled or voluntary, they may
erode racial stereotypes and thus reshape preferences. Nonetheless, there would be costs to regulating dating websites and banning or discouraging the expression of racial preferences. Although antidiscrimination laws often focus on deterring discrimination by whites, most laws, including Title VII, also ban discrimination by people of color. If the law applied to all races in the context of dating websites, it would constrain the racial preferences of blacks and other minorities, which might not be based on stereotypes. A study that compared references to race in 2400 Yahoo personal profiles of men found that men of color were more likely than whites to mention race.\textsuperscript{19} Indeed, blacks were six times more likely than whites to mention race.\textsuperscript{20} Of the black men seeking men, 14 percent mentioned race simply to state that they had no racial preference and 13 percent expressed a preference for whites only.\textsuperscript{21} Just 19 percent expressed a preference for blacks only.\textsuperscript{22} The authors of the study concluded that “minority men are more sensitive to race than are White men, probably due to their experiences as minorities.”\textsuperscript{23} Whereas whites have the privilege not to think about race,\textsuperscript{24} I have argued elsewhere that blacks see race-consciousness as necessary to their survival in white-controlled domains.\textsuperscript{25} And this phenomenon may extend to intimate realms as well. Since blacks spend their days at work trying to rebut racial stereotypes and navigating the pressure to uphold colorblind norms by rendering “racial comfort,”\textsuperscript{26} they may find the prospect of doing this work in the most intimate realms of their lives to be distasteful. They may crave a space where,

\textsuperscript{19} See Phua & Kaufman, \textit{supra} note 10, at 991.
\textsuperscript{20} See \textit{id.} at 989.
\textsuperscript{21} See \textit{id.} at 988.
\textsuperscript{22} See \textit{id.}
\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Id.} at 991.
\textsuperscript{24} Barbara Flagg, “\textit{Was Blind, But Now I See”}: \textit{White Race Consciousness and the Requirement of Discriminatory Intent}, 91 Mich. L. Rev. 953, 969-972 (1993) (stating that “the white person has an everyday option not to think of herself in racial terms at all”).
\textsuperscript{25} See Robinson, \textit{supra} note 37, at XX.
\textsuperscript{26} See generally Carbado & Gulati, \textit{supra} note 15; Robinson, \textit{supra} note 10.
at the end of a long day battling racial stereotypes at work and in public, they can lay
down the burden of being black and just be. Sadly, because of the persistent racial
disparities between blacks and whites, it may be very difficult for a black person to
experience this type of racial transcendence with a white person. I argue below that
blacks may be particularly likely to have non-stereotypical reasons for avoiding
relationships with whites, including the racial conflict that often stems from black-white
differences in perceiving discrimination. At the same time, racial minorities are likely to
have a special need for screening in order to effectuate their preferences. Because whites
are in the majority, they would likely have an ample number of white potential partners
even if websites did not permit racial classifications and race-based searching of their
databases. It is true that they would have to consider some people of color, but often the
majority of the “matches” generated by the site or obtained by the user would continue to
be white. By contrast, people of color on mostly-white websites would have a harder
time connecting with the few potential mates who are people of color. They may have to
wade through a large pool of white prospects in order to access the elusive person of the
same race. Such regulation would be problematic in that it would exert greater pressure
on minorities to cross racial lines than it would on white people. It may exacerbate the
structural impediments, such as residential segregation and wealth disparities, which
already isolate minorities who live and work in white-dominated spaces. Because not all
reasons for racial preferences are problematic, we must consider the identities and the
contexts that shape any particular preference.27

27 See RANDALL KENNEDY, INTERRACIAL INTIMACIES: SEX, MARRIAGE, IDENTITY AND ADOPTION 29
(2003).
C. Constraining Queer Sexuality and Reifying Heterosexuality

In this section, I briefly consider the impact of social and internet structures on sexual preferences for men or women. The designation of certain spaces as queer, as in the Castro in San Francisco or Chelsea in New York City, has a dual function. These mostly-urban spaces draw people who are interested in exploring their sexuality and might have limited opportunities in rural and suburban areas. In this way, they cultivate and enable queer preferences. However, by designating certain spaces as “officially gay,” do we also implicitly identify the rest of the world as officially straight? This demarcation of spaces allows self-identified straight people to avoid gay spaces and remain within the straight zones—where they are protected from queer advances, which might challenge their sexual identity. Brad Sears has written that his entrée to the gay community and dating black men came through attending a gay club with his then-girlfriend. Unlike the highly specialized and largely monochromatic gay male clubs that predominate in large cities today, this club was a general home for outsiders: “lesbians and gay, black and white, young and old, the trannies and the wheelchaired.” Sears writes that an interaction with a black man who challenged his failure to be out “sparked a revolution in my worldview and self-image.” In major cities today, most queer clubs and bars are dominated by either men or women, and a “heterosexual” couple like Sears and his then-girlfriend would stand out like a sore thumb.

28 See, e.g., Sears, supra note 4.
29 See id.
30 Id.
31 Id.
The Internet similarly reflects a strict separation of romantic markets. For example, Match requires the user to search for either a man or a woman; he cannot search for potential male and female dates.\(^{32}\) Thus, it erases the possibility of bisexuality.\(^{33}\) One might think that my proposals with respect to race should be extended to sex so that profiles cannot specify sex, and users cannot search based on sex. Yet this intervention would approach compulsory bisexuality. Requiring men who want to have sex with men to wade through a large pool of women (and vice versa) seems too invasive given a narrower fix —instead of a man having to state that he is looking for a man or a woman, he should be able to state that he is looking for either.\(^{34}\)

Although inclusive social spaces seem to be fading in the U.S., they may be more prevalent in particular communities abroad, where sexual identity is not as rigid and reductive. During summer 2007, friends in Argentina took me to a cavernous club with a crowd that was very mixed in terms of sexual orientation. This diversity extended even to a darkroom. In this space, queer and straight couples made out alongside each other, and importantly, the spatial integration allowed a significant number of men who were not easily defined as queer or straight to blur sexual boundaries. According to my Argentine friends, the club attracts men who identify as straight but might occasionally have sex with another man they meet at the club. This integrated backroom is thus a structure that complicates crude lines of identification and facilitates sexual exploration, expanding romantic preferences as much as we confine them in U.S. gay ghettos.

\(^{32}\) See [http://www.match.com/](http://www.match.com/) (prompting the user to state whether he is a “man” or a “woman” and whether he is searching for a “man” or a “woman”).


\(^{34}\) Even the requirement that a person identify as a “man” or a “woman” is too narrow in that transgendered people may feel excluded.
Romantic spaces tend not only to be segregated into “straight” and “queer” zones but in queer communities, they are rigidly designated for men or women as well. We might benefit from thinking critically about the influence of such sex-segregated structures. How might the norms governing a social space be transformed by including queer women with queer men? Is it possible that certain male-identified traits, such as a fixation on sexual conquest and gratification, would be diluted if women were present? I pause to emphasize that I am not arguing that men are naturally hypersexual and women are naturally less sexual beings, but that the social norms that say men are supposed to simply want to hook up and lesbians are supposed to want to “U-Haul” might be disrupted and complicated if men and women socialized together more. Perhaps more queer women would feel free to hook up and more queer men would feel free to pursue a relationship. Further, we should ask whether the misogyny that continues to exist in many gay men is bolstered by the de facto men-only policies in most spaces where queer men socialize.

II. **Race in the Bedroom**

My second main point is that race structures our relationships even when we think we have “transcended it.” Race may determine how power is allocated and exercised in interracial relationships. Racial privilege does not vanish simply because two people have committed to a relationship or marriage. It may continue to be a third member of

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36 This is a reference to a long-standing joke in the lesbian community:  
**Q**: *What does a lesbian bring on a second date?*  
**A**: *A U-Haul.*

the partnership, present in the bedroom and the relationship more generally, even if it is cloaked by norms of colorblindness.

I illustrate this dynamic by drawing on a phenomenon that I call perceptual segregation. I argue that black and white people who observe the same interracial incident are likely to disagree as to whether the white person committed discrimination. This is so because black and white people, on average, subscribe to different definitions of discrimination and use disparate evidentiary standards for identifying discrimination. Because blacks, for various reasons, are likely to define discrimination more broadly than whites and less likely to require evidence of bad intent, the black partner in an interracial relationship may perceive discrimination where her white partner does not. She then must decide whether to articulate this perception or to “cover” it. In general, people of color and women who complain about discrimination are characterized as whiners, hypersensitive and enthralled by a victim mentality. The popular refrain, “He’s just playing the race card,” often functions to deflect black perceptions and conclude that the real problem is the black person’s deluded mindset. There is no reason to think that the general social aversion to and skepticism of black complaints about discrimination evaporates when two people fall in love or have sex.

Because the black and white partner in an interracial relationship have inherited different racialized conceptions of discrimination from their respective communities, they are likely to experience perceptual conflict in the context of their relationship. This

37 For an in-depth analysis of this phenomenon and an application to the legal system, see Perceptual Segregation, 108 COLUM. L. REV. ___ (forthcoming summer 2008).

conflict could emerge in myriad ways and might manifest itself in many mundane, daily encounters. An experience as routine as dining out might provoke a racial dispute if the couple experiences adverse treatment from the staff. For example, the hostess might appear to seat an all-white party before the interracial couple, or the waiter might seem aloof or hostile toward the couple.39 In most scenarios, there could be multiple explanations for this adverse treatment—the hostess is incompetent, the restaurant is very busy, and/or the waiter is having a bad day.40 Perceptual segregation suggests that the black partner is likely to be more race-conscious than the white partner and more vigilant in monitoring potential discrimination. The white partner, meanwhile, might think the best way to overcome race is to ignore it. In light of this belief in colorblindness, the white partner may gravitate toward the non-racial explanations for the adverse treatment. Warren, a man included in Kellina Craig-Henderson’s study of black men in interracial relationships, reported that during his eight-year relationship with a white woman he often noticed that people around them in public places were uncomfortable.41 Although Warren was attentive to these adverse reactions, his white partner was “usually totally oblivious to their reactions and could have cared less.” When pressed as to why he noticed other people’s reactions, he explained: “Well because, ummm. . . my being Black and I have to deal with this. I have to be aware . . . .”42 His white girlfriend did not have

39 See, e.g., Julie Schmit and Larry Copeland, Cracker Barrel Customer Says Bias Was ‘Flagrant,’ USA Today, May 7, 2004, at 1B (describing lawsuits by black and interracial parties who alleged that Cracker Barrel restaurant chain discriminated against them).
40 CRAIG-HENDERSON, supra note 1, at 123 (reporting experience of Chester, who stated “it was mostly a matter of perception . . . for example, if we get a bad table in a restaurant or very slow service. . .you’re never really certain”).
41 See id. at 102. Although I emphasize a number of the problematic responses from Craig-Henderson’s interviews, a number of the men explained their involvement in interracial relationships in ways that were not stereotypical or otherwise troubling. See, e.g., id. at 107-08 (discussing Damon, who was not looking for a white woman but ended up happily married to one, much to his surprise).
42 Id.
to, and apparently that perceptual difference created a rift between them. Because of these clashing mindsets, the couple may be predisposed to disagree when confronted with issues of potential discrimination. Note that these disagreements could encompass many social-political issues as well. For example, surveys have shown a substantial black-white divide regarding the role of race in the government’s inadequate response to Hurricane Katrina, the extent of racial bias in the criminal justice system, the likelihood that the government created AIDS to harm black communities and the extent to which the government subjects black government officials to greater surveillance. Thus, not only daily interactions but also news reports bear the potential to spark racialized disagreements.

People in interracial relationships are likely to respond to this conflict in two ways. First, they may argue frequently about such issues. In addition to the arguments that a couple might have for all sorts of non-racial reasons, the interracial couple must also manage potential conflict over race, one of the most intensely felt and polarizing topics. The racial differences in perception thus impose an extra burden on black-white relationships. Of course some all-black couples and all-white couples might also disagree about race at times, but they are more likely to agree than interracial couples because they are likely to have had similar racial experiences. One might expect that white people who form relationships with blacks tend to be more race-conscious and sympathetic to black perceptions of race than the average white person. This seems true for some people in interracial relationships, but the extent of this dynamic is unclear. Further, studies suggest that other people engage in interracial relationships for reasons

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43 Robinson, Perceptual Segregation, supra note 37, at 9, 20-21.
that would not seem to reflect a progressive, race-conscious mindset.\footnote{Consider this white man’s explanation for why he prefers Asian women: “he stated that he liked them because their food ‘is awesome,’ they are ‘just so attractive to me,’ and he ‘just love[s] the Asian race, it’s so mystical to me in a way.” BONILLA-SILVA, supra note 3, at 118.} For instance, social psychologist Craig-Henderson argues that some people in interracial relationships are motivated by a desire to flout social norms or are animated by racial stereotypes, including aesthetic preferences shaped by white supremacy (for example, the belief that black men are more sexually aggressive and well-endowed, or the notion that white women have more beautiful physical features, such as long straight hair). For instance, one of the subjects in her study of black men in interracial relationships said that “there was no such thing as an ‘unattractive White woman.”\footnote{CRAIG-HENDERSON, supra note 1, at 97.} Some people might view their interracial partner as a racial “souvenir.”\footnote{Id. at 97.} Others may justify their preference for non-blacks by stereotyping their own race. L.G., a man in Craig-Henderson’s study, explained that his aversion to black women was because they do not have “their act together . . . financially, emotionally . . . and spiritually, or any of those types of things,” and he does not want to put up with “a lot of games and a lot of nonsense.”\footnote{Id. at 105. L.G.’s explanation is ironic because this is precisely the sort of charge that black women sometimes level at black men. See Joy Jones, “Marriage Is for White People,” Wash. Post, March 26, 2006, at B01.} We can also see this by looking at online profiles of people who, rather than refusing to date black people, actively seek them out. [Discuss examples from adam4adam.]

A second reaction to racial conflict may occur even when the white partner is more race-conscious than the average white person, but does not quite see eye-to-eye with her black partner. Couples can avoid arguments over race if one (or both) of the partners suppresses her conflicting perceptions. For instance, if a white woman disagrees with her
black husband’s assertion that the hostess in a restaurant is racist she may withhold her contrary opinion to preserve peace. Or the black husband may silence his instinct that he was subjected to discrimination at work and decide not to confront the perpetrator because he does not want to upset his wife. Consider Derrick, the man in Craig-Henderson’s study who stated that there was “no such thing as an ‘unattractive White woman.’” He acknowledged that he had to “tough it out” while spending time with his Cuban wife’s family because they “frequently made racial slurs and emphasized the fact of his Blackness.”

Derrick learned to laugh at such slurs because that reaction ingratiated him with his in-laws, yet he privately harbored animosity toward them. He also disclosed that he had to limit his interactions with other black people because his wife “did not feel comfortable around other black people, including his friends and family.” When he tried to confront his wife about her aversion to other blacks, she denied the racial element, stating it was not “a racial thing,” but she was just not a social person. Some people of color may deal with the potential for racial conflict by adopting a colorblind mentality, which is pervasive among whites. One way of transcending race, then, may be the choice (conscious or unconscious) not to see it or the

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48 Id. at 98. Although this example involves a Cuban woman, who may have been able to pass for white, I do not mean to imply that Latinos in general are aligned with the “white” perspective in perceiving (or failing to perceive) instances of discrimination.

49 See id.

50 Id.; see also id. at 119 (discussing Chester, who “generally avoided seeing certain ‘Black’ movies with his wife “because they might make her ‘uncomfortable’”).

51 Id.

52 See id. at 103-104 (discussing M.B., who stated that for him and his white girlfriend “we view people as people. For us, color just doesn’t matter. . . .”); see also Robinson, supra note 37, at XX (discussing psychological evidence suggesting that many people of color and women minimize discrimination as a coping mechanism); Gary Blasi & John T. Jost, System Justification Theory and Research: Implications for Law, Legal Advocacy, and Social Justice, 94 Cal. L. Rev. 1119, 1119 (2006) (applying system justification theory, which holds that outsiders have strong incentives to minimize discrimination in order to avoid the view that the social world is structurally aligned against them). Craig-Henderson was surprised to find that several men in her study could not recall a single instance of adverse reaction to their interracial relationship. CRAIG-HENDERSON, supra note 1, at 124.
burdens it imposes on one’s life. The racial divide on issues of discrimination and the substantial work that must be done to soften or bridge the divide through various mechanisms (e.g., rendering racial comfort, “toughing it out,” adopting a colorblind perspective) shed new light on the preferences that some people of color might have wanting to date or marry a person of the same race.53

Craig-Henderson’s book includes only men who identify as heterosexual. We can see how these dynamics play out in a queer context by turning to Dwight McBride’s book WHY I HATE ABERCROMBIE & FITCH.54 In this book, he recounts his interracial dating experiences while in graduate school at UCLA. In one case, he was approached by a white man at a club. After a few minutes of conversation in which the two seemed to be connecting, the white man said he and his friends were “out looking for black guys tonight.” The white man smiled as if McBride would be impressed, and perhaps grateful. But he was not. There was a racialized perceptual divide—what the white man intended as a compliment or enticement actually upset McBride. McBride writes:

At that moment, I wanted to be far away from him . . . [and] from the gay world that had brought me a perceived sense of liberation only a few months before . . . That same gay world was now teaching me some important lessons . . . about my value in that world and the ways in which race and racism would have congress in even my most intimate of negotiations within it.55

The white man’s interest appeared to start and stop with McBride’s skin color and the attributes he assumed to correlate with it. After all, the white friends were looking for

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53 These particular concerns of blacks and other people of color are distinct from the concerns that whites often cite as a basis for not wanting their family members to enter interracial marriages. See Bonilla-Silva, supra note 3, at 121-22 (citing interviews with white person who opposed interracial marriage because of purported harms to interracial children); id. at 123 (noting that whites sometimes used the discrimination faced by interracial couples to justify their opposition to interracial relationships).
55 See id. at 120.
blacks just for “tonight.” Tomorrow, having satisfied their momentary fetish, they would presumably move on to something else. Maybe it would be “Latin night.”

On another occasion, McBride met a white man and eventually slept with him. The sex was good, McBride writes, until his white partner yelled out “Give me that big black dick!” at which point McBride says he nearly went limp. Later, the white man told him: “You’re the first black guy I’ve ever been with.” Again, McBride’s white partner either intended these comments as compliments or was indifferent as to how McBride would receive them.

The biggest mystery in light of the numerous interracial indignities and disconnections McBride catalogues in his book is why he continued to engage white men. Part of the answer likely lies in structure. Spending most of his time at UCLA, like me, he likely had limited opportunities to meet black men of a similar educational and social class. As a result of these structural constraints, McBride came up with a compromise: he would date white men, but only under certain circumstances. I can only imagine that one of these rules must have been “No talking during sex.”

When race is not frankly engaged in relationships, the white partner and the black partner might have completely distinct experiences. Because the black person is likely to be more race-conscious and more sensitive to potential racial slights, he may be engaged in a constant racial negotiation. The white partner, by contrast, may be oblivious to these dynamics and attest that they enjoy a colorblind relationship. Meanwhile, the black

56 Id.
57 Id. at 121.
58 See id. at 124-25.
59 For a humorous take on “rules for dating a whiteboy,” see James Hannaham, Mr. White Now: Beware the Chocoholic, VILL. VOICE, June 17, 2005.
partner may be asking: How much racial education should I have to do in this relationship? How many offensive remarks must I let slide? How many experiences with discrimination should I stifle for fear of aggravating my partner? At what point does it all become too much? And, to the extent that some people of color have a high tolerance for racial humiliation and continue to prefer white people, what does that tell us about the enduring appeal of whiteness, even in communities of color?

III. ASSESSING RACIAL PREFERENCES AMONG MEN WHO DATE MEN

In this Part, I present a study that generated empirical data on the impact of race in internet dating interactions. We assessed racial preferences among men who have sex with men and connect with other men on a popular men-only website, www.adam4adam.com (“A4A”). The research consisted of two stages. First, we conducted a preliminary survey of profiles in order to determine how frequently website users explicitly mentioned a racial preference. We also evaluated these profiles to get a sense of the justifications and stereotypes animating racial preferences. In the second part of the study, we created personal profiles in order to compare the relative demand for men of color who perform particular sex roles. Race appears to shape romantic opportunities through prevalent stereotypes that assign men of color to certain sexual roles based on their race or ethnicity. For instance, I have argued elsewhere that black men are often expected to be hypermasculine, sexually aggressive and well-endowed. By contrast, Asian men may be stereotyped as passive and submissive and more likely to

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60 I conducted this study with my research assistant, Greg Furtado, who provided invaluable assistance. In addition, my colleague Saul Sarabia advised and assisted with the study.
61 See Robinson, supra note 10, at 1822-23.
adopt a feminine role in a gay couple.62 These stereotypes limit individual freedom by putting pressure on men of such races to conform to the stereotype in order to maximize the number of dates they obtain. Because of the norm of colorblindness, we cannot expect all people to be frank about their racial preferences when it comes to dating and partnering.63 Although preliminary analysis showed that a relatively small number of users expressed racial preferences in their profiles, we wanted to learn whether a larger group of men has racial preferences, even if they would not articulate them directly. Thus, this study attempted to discern aggregate trends in terms of demand for men of particular races who play particular sex roles in the marketplace of desire. For instance, we asked whether there was more demand for a black “top” (the sex role widely perceived as masculine) than for a black “bottom” (widely perceived as more feminine).

We ascertained these trends by posting nearly identical profiles on A4A. The statistics and descriptions of the profiles we posted were very similar,64 but each time we posted the profile, we changed the race and sex role. Importantly, each profile featured one photo of the same model, an attractive and fit personal trainer. Because we did not use different models, one cannot attribute the differences in market interest to the attractiveness of particular models or features. Our goal was to control for physical attractiveness as we determined aggregate racial preferences by comparing the number of emails that each profile attracted. Not only did we want to compare demand for men of

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62 See id.
63 See, e.g., Robinson, Perceptual Segregation, supra note 37, at XX.
64 The statistics of each profile (height, weight, penis size, etc.) were identical for each profile. The primary difference was that we changed the profile’s text slightly so that users of the website would not become suspicious. For example, the first racial profile (i.e., White Top) included text stating “No-nonsense man looking for same. Cut to the chase about what you want.” The second racial profile (i.e., White Bottom) contained the same basic message but in different language: “Let’s get to the point. No games or BS.” Because we thought the black profiles might provoke the most skepticism because of our model’s racial features, we wrote the black profiles so that the profile referred to the subject as a “light-skinned black man.”
different races and sexual roles, but we also wanted to learn which races constitute the primary markets for each combination. For example, do mostly white men send emails to the Asian Bottom profile? The ultimate goal of this project was to demonstrate the impact of race in determining the opportunities that men have for finding romantic partners and the pressures that racial stereotypes exert on certain men of color.

A. Methodology

For the first stage of this project, we analyzed expressions of racial preferences stated in personal profiles on A4A. We studied roughly 500 profiles, which were selected based upon their sequential order in a random search of personal profiles in the L.A. area. We created an account with no identifiable information in order to navigate the site and search through the profiles. We conducted a search with only the following geographical parameters: North America; California; Southern CA LA City; All areas. No other categorical restrictions (e.g., race, age, sex role) were used.

On October 24, 2007, the first 300 personal profiles were viewed and saved as PDFs in sequential order. This was done by opening each ad in its own window and then converting that window into a PDF. On October 29, 2007, another 215 personal profiles were viewed and saved as PDFs in the same fashion.

We saved personal profiles and gave each a numerical identifier based only on the order in which they were viewed and saved. We then put profiles into a database linking the numerical identifier with a username, geographical location, sexual position, race, racial preference. Usernames were used to identify any duplicate personal profiles acquired during the second session on October 29, 2007.
Numerical designations were assigned to major geographical locations within Los Angeles, race, and sexual position, as defined by the website. Racial preferences were assessed for the six racial categories identified by the website (Asian, Black, Latino, Middle Eastern, White, and Mixed). If a racial preference was stated or implied, a numeric identifier (1) was entered for the particular race so identified. The direction of that preference, whether positive or negative, was then captured by changing the sign of the numeric identifier previously entered. Thus, a statement in a profile looking for Asian men would be identified with a “+1” in the Asian column. A statement in a profile that the user was not looking for Asian men would be identified with a “-1” in the Asian column. Personal profiles stating that they were looking only for a certain race were identified with a “+1” in the column of the stated race and a “-1” for all other racial categories.

For the second stage of this project, personal profiles were created on the website with only the following information: Username; Picture; Location; Profile Headline; Profile Text; Age; Height; Weight; Waist Size; Body Type; Hair; Body Hair; Looking For (users can state that they are looking for sex and/or relationships, etc.); Race; Sex Role; Smoke (whether the person smokes or not); and Penis Size. Each profile included a photograph of the same model, whose shirtless torso was exposed. The photographs did

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65 The 11 geographical locations were assigned numbers alphabetically. Thus, Downtown was “1,” East LA was “2,” Echo Park & West Lake was “3,” etc. The 6 racial categories were assigned numerical identifiers similarly with Asian being assigned “1,” Black “2,” etc., though Mixed was assigned “6,” outside the otherwise alphabetical order. The 5 sexual position preferences were assigned numbers based on the sequential order as given by www.adam4adam.com. Top was “1,” Bottom was “2,” Vers/Top was “3,” Vers/Bottom was “4,” and Versatile was “5.”

66 Statements in personal ads regarding whether or not the individual was “out” or not were identified in similar fashion. If a personal ad stated that the individual was “out,” then that ad was assigned a “+1.” If the ad stated that the individual was not “out,” then that ad was assigned a “-1.” Ads that stated neither were assigned a “0.”
not disclose his face, which is common on the website. The model was an attractive, athletic Latino gay man, whom we selected because his skin color was not near either end of the color spectrum (neither extremely pale nor extremely brown).

The racial designation (Asian, Black, Latino, and White) and Sex Role (Top or Bottom) were then varied for each profile that we created. Username, picture, profile headline, and profile text were also varied depending on the race and sex role of the personal ad. Pictures were of the exact same model and varied only in pose and lighting. We selected pictures with the goal of making each picture within a sex role category equally flattering. Thus, the poses for all the “top” profiles were similar, and the poses for all the “bottom” profiles were similar.

Usernames were generated based upon the race of the personal profile being posted and the sex role of the profile. Some profiles were also created with a neighborhood location or a numeral to add variety, though the numeral assigned was neutral enough so as not to imply penis size. Locations within Los Angeles and New York were chosen to avoid neighborhoods with strong racially identities (such as Harlem in New York). We chose downtown for Los Angeles and Midtown for New York. In selecting these specific neighborhoods, we intended to discern the racial dynamics of white-dominated marketplaces of desire, not the various ethnic pockets throughout the city, which might exhibit very different norms and trends in terms of racial preferences.

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67 The profiles were also created with a locked “private pic” that was never unlocked during the course of the study.

68 Some users of the site incorporate references to their penis size (for example, “Teninchtot”) in their usernames in order to attract interest.

69 The pervasiveness of racial segregation in housing made it impossible to choose a neighborhood with no racial connotations. However, we did our best to minimize such connotations.
We wrote profile headlines to be as brief as possible and mainly to reiterate the basic race and sex role information contained in the profile. Thus, one profile headline read “White Top Seeing What’s Out There” and another read “No-nonsense White Bottom.” Profile text was kept short, similar to the profile headline, in order to minimize extraneous information and to keep uniformity amongst the profiles. Each profile headline conveyed the basic message to keep communications brief in order to facilitate hooking up more quickly. For example, one profile read “No-nonsense man looking for same. Cut to the chase about what you want” while another read “Let’s get to the point. No games or BS.”

Age, height, weight, waist size, body type, hair, body hair, looking for, smoke, and penis size were the same for every personal ad. Each personal ad was for a 25-year-old man, 5’ 9” tall, 167 pounds, 31” waist, athletic body type, black hair, smooth body, non-smoking, 8” penis, looking for 1-on-1 Sex, 3some/Group Sex, or Relationship. We selected these statistics in order to maximize the attractiveness of the profile and yet minimize (to the extent possible) tension with prevailing racial stereotypes. For example we worried that if we made the height 6’2”, some users might doubt that an Asian man would be that tall. No profile included any expression of racial preference or any other sign that might have deterred people of other races from expressing interest.

A4A requires approval of all pictures uploaded to a personal ad. Since obtaining approval requires as much as 48 hours, profiles were created two days before the designated Saturday evening when we signed onto A4A with the profile. Although users can search all active profiles, the users who are currently online are displayed most prominently and often receive the most messages. We created each profile and posted it
once by signing on during a Saturday night in the following order in Los Angeles: White top; White bottom; Black top; Black bottom; Asian top; Asian bottom; Latino Top; Latino bottom. The order in New York was the following (reverse racial): Latino top; Latino bottom; Asian top; Asian bottom; Black top; Black bottom; White top; White bottom. The postings occurred from February 2 - March 22, 2008. Each Saturday during this period we posted one profile in Los Angeles and one in New York.

We signed on each profile for one hour on a Saturday evening starting at 10 PM (PST) in Los Angeles and 1 AM (EST) in New York. We selected these times because we expected them to be prime time for men looking to connect with another man, and we anticipated that the New York scene extended later than the Los Angeles scene. We counted all emails that the profile received from initial posting (which happened on Thursday) until Saturday evening at 11 PM in Los Angeles or Sunday morning at 2 AM in New York. During the hour in which we signed on with the profile, we recorded racial demographics for the first 100 users randomly displayed using the “Members Online” function of the Website for each area (Los Angeles & New York). After the hour had elapsed, 11 PM (PST) for Los Angeles and 2 AM (EST) for New York, we signed off and made a PDF screen capture of the email inbox of the profile to show the total number of emails received during that hour. We also took PDF screen captures of each individual e-mail received and the profile of the sender of the email. We then deleted the profile that we had posted. We did not respond to any emails or initiate conversations with any users. We simply posted each profile and let the users of the site respond to it.
B. Results & Discussion

The results of this study produced three main findings. First, as depicted in the first graph below, the results suggest a racial hierarchy among men who have sex with men. The white profiles received the most emails and were closely followed by the Latino profiles. Next in line were Asians, who received substantially fewer emails than Latinos. Finally, at the bottom of this racial hierarchy, were blacks. This finding suggests that scholars must be careful when discussing discrimination against people of color in romantic marketplaces. Not all racial minority groups are similarly positioned. The closeness of the results for whites and Latinos is surprising. Although white profiles received 4 more emails than Latino profiles, the difference is not statistically significant. However, as I discuss below, there are important intra-racial distinctions among Latinos that warrant further study.

![Number of e-mails received by race](image)

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The second main finding is that the Black Bottom profiles were uniquely disadvantaged. This finding thus partially confirms this Essay’s hypothesis regarding the interaction of racial stereotypes and sex role. In general, the top profiles drew more emails than the bottom profiles. The Limitations section below explores one potential explanation for this trend. But the starkest disparity between top and bottom was among the black profiles. As predicted by the stereotype of black male endowment and virility, the Black Top profiles drew substantially more emails (26) than the Black Bottom profiles (4), which received the fewest emails in the entire study. The disinterest in the Black Bottom fully extended to black respondents to the profiles. Indeed, not a single black respondent (or Asian or Latino respondent) sent an email to a Black Bottom profile. It thus appears that many black men in white-dominated marketplaces of desire have
internalized the stereotype of black male virility and have little interest in black men who are perceived as violating this norm. The image of a black man being penetrated may simply be too far afield from the iconic image of rapper 50 Cent, who is viewed as masculine, aggressive and, in some quarters, essentially black. By contrast, a black man who identifies as a bottom may be viewed as the inverse of the so-called “hypermasculine” black man represented by 50 Cent. Since users have limited information about the person behind the profile, they might use sex role as a proxy for effeminacy, flamboyancy and being openly gay, which are disfavored traits. They may think it is shameful and “un-black” to identify as a bottom.\(^70\) Black men looking for bottoms may express more interest in men of other races because a white man or Asian man bottoming, for instance, does not violate any racial norm to which the black men subscribe.

I emphasize that this norm does not operate only among blacks. Although a few white men sent emails to the Black Bottom profiles, the strikingly low number of emails suggests that men of all races have little interest in black men who identify as bottoms. A related pattern emerged from the responses to the Latino profiles. There was substantially more interest in Latino Top profiles (52 emails) than Latino Bottom profiles (27), although the market for Latino bottoms clearly surpasses that for black and Asian bottoms. We expected the Black Top profiles to enjoy a special advantage because of the stereotype of black male endowment/virility and the context of a sex-oriented website that for many users may be quite distinct from the search for a life partner. However, the

\(^70\) There may be a distinction between identifying as a bottom and performing the bottom role at times. For instance, some black men on A4A identify as tops yet seek only other tops. The implication is that at least one of the tops will bottom but neither holds himself out as a bottom publicly. This practice may be more acceptable among some blacks (and non-blacks) than identifying as a bottom.
Black Top profiles got half the emails of the Latino Top profiles (26 vs. 52) and about the same as the Latino Bottom profiles (26 vs. 27). Thus, although the stereotypes about black male sexuality create a market for Black Top profiles, they remain subordinate to the White Top and Latino Top, and they surpass only the Asian Top in market power among tops (26 vs. 17).

By contrast to blacks and Latinos, sex role did not make a difference for Asians. Although Asians ranked below whites and Latinos, there was not a disparity between the Asian Top and Asian Bottom profiles. Indeed, each drew exactly 17 emails in the entire study. We expected the Asian Top profiles to be disadvantaged as much as the Black Bottom profiles because they are counter-stereotypical. Yet the Black Top profiles received only a few more emails than the Asian Top profiles. This finding might suggest that the stereotype of Asian men as feminine is no longer very salient among men who have sex with men. At the same time, our Asian Top profiles may have been viewed as exceptions to the stereotype. Because the profiles reported the model’s statistics to be 5’9”, 165 lbs and an 8-inch endowment (statistics that we expected to attract many users), the Asian Top profiles may have surmounted the stereotype. A future study could test this by using less attractive statistics, say, 5’5”, 120 lbs and a 6-inch endowment, and determining whether the Asian Top profiles incur greater disadvantage than appeared in our study. Relatedly, the Asian Bottom may not have benefited much from the stereotype of Asian male effeminacy, although Asians were the only racial group for which the demand for bottoms matched that for tops. The preferred bottom was white and then

71 The demand for Asian Top profiles was roughly the same in New York and Los Angeles. For Asian Bottom profiles, there was much more demand in Los Angeles (13 emails) than New York (4 emails).
Latino. The White Bottom profiles received more than twice as many emails as the Asian Bottom profiles (38 vs. 17).

A third finding is thus that whites appear to have a special advantage in that they may take on a top or bottom role without incurring significant penalties in the marketplace. A Latino top who becomes a bottom gives up a significant privilege, since the Latino Top profiles generated the most interest in the entire study and the Latino Bottoms garnered about half as many emails (52 vs. 27). Black men similarly face considerable pressure to perform a top role. Although the Black Top remains disadvantaged relative to the Latino and White Tops, at least he received a significant number of emails. The Black Bottom profile in New York received just one email; in L.A., the Black Bottom received 3 emails.

C. Limitations

There are some limitations to this study that require discussion. First, one explanation for the disparity in the responses to the top and bottom profiles may be that the pictures/statistics for the top profiles were regarded as more attractive. The top photos showed the model’s torso, which included a well-defined chest and six-pack abdominal muscles. For the bottom photos, the model was photographed from the side or from the back. In these photos, he did not appear as muscular and athletic as in the top photographs. Although we anticipated that muscle and athleticism would be more important to users seeking a top, it is possible that bottom profiles using the top photographs would have drawn greater interest. Further, the endowment listed in all

72 The findings suggest that Asians also enjoy this freedom. However, regardless of the role they assume, Asians draw less interest than whites.
profiles may have provided only the top profiles with an advantage. It appears that a
profile with an 8-inch endowment is above average on A4A, which might have made our
top profiles especially appealing. By contrast, because the bottom plays the receptive
role in anal intercourse, users may have viewed his endowment as irrelevant. Relatedly,
because of prevalent stereotypes of black men, the black profiles may have been
disadvantaged because they did not conform to the stereotype of a black man. Instead of
featuring the brown skin of a Denzel Washington or a Wesley Snipes, the black profiles
appeared to be closer to the shade of a Barack Obama. Moreover, it is possible that
inflated expectations of black male endowment made our black profiles appear to be
merely average for black men or even below average. However, we were committed to
using the same model and same statistics for each profile, even though we realized that
each profile would be read in light of prevailing racial stereotypes. In pre-testing the
photos, I showed them to several people who understood the design of the study. One
person responded that the model “could not” be black because “black men have bigger
builds.” (Our model’s build was closer to Obama’s than 50 Cent.) Of course, black men
come in all shapes and sizes, but the black profiles may have suffered if they were
perceived as diverging from the iconic image of an aggressive, strapping and extremely
well-endowed black man.

Another limitation is that residential segregation made it extremely difficult to
find a romantic marketplace that was racially mixed. If men are logging on in search of a
quick hook up, they may be unlikely to travel far from home. The selection of
neighborhoods with relatively small black populations may have disadvantaged black
profiles in particular. On a recent Wednesday night at 10:00 PM in New York City, we found just 9 tops online in midtown (the neighborhood in which all New York profiles resided). Yet there were 44 black tops in Harlem Central. Thus, posting the profiles in Harlem or parts of Brooklyn may have produced greater interest from black users. By posting the profiles in Midtown New York and Downtown Los Angeles, we forced them to compete with all others races in a white-dominated marketplace, and for the most part they came out on the losing end. Although the black profiles would have likely benefited from being posted in Harlem, blacks enjoyed greater overall representation in the online community (16%) than Asians (6%), and yet the Black Bottom profiles fared much worse than the Asian Bottom profiles.

Overall racial demographics in the online community, which is based on our count of 100 randomly displayed profiles each time we posted a profile, are as follows: 46% white; 18% Latino, 16% black; 13% mixed, 6% Asian, and 1% Middle Eastern.

But posting all profiles in Harlem would have raised concerns about the non-black profiles, especially the white and Asian profiles.