

How Racism Affects the Lives of African Americans

Posted on July 20, 2018

Introduction

Racism affects African American life through institutions, cultural representation, economic distribution, bodily regulation, and everyday interaction. Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Sexual Politics* provides a useful framework because it shows that racism cannot be separated from gender, sexuality, and class. Images of Black men as inherently violent or hypersexual and Black women as sexually available, irresponsible, or excessively strong do not merely insult individuals. They help justify unequal policing, labor exploitation, family surveillance, health neglect, and exclusion from social sympathy. The original essay also invoked Sarah Baartman and Héctor Carrillo's work on sexuality and HIV, indicating an interest in how racialized sexual meanings travel across history and communities. This revised analysis centers African American experience while using those materials carefully to explain representation, structural inequality, health, and liberatory politics without treating Black life as defined only by oppression.

Collins's Framework of Black Sexual Politics

Collins argues that sexuality is a major arena in which race, gender, and power are organized. "Black sexual politics" refers to the ideas and practices that classify bodies, distribute respectability, and define whose intimacy or family life is considered legitimate. These politics are intersectional: Black women and men encounter racism differently because stereotypes attach to gender, class, sexuality, age, and citizenship. A single-axis account that discusses racism without sexism can ignore Black women, while an account of sexism based only on white women's experience can ignore racial domination. Collins therefore links representation with material institutions. Controlling images supply a vocabulary through which unequal treatment appears natural, deserved, or protective rather than political (Collins, 2004).

Controlling Images and the Production of "Common Sense"

Racial stereotypes become powerful when they are repeated until they resemble common sense. Historically, Black women have been represented through figures such as the mammy, jezebel, welfare mother, and angry Black woman. Black men have been cast as criminal, sexually threatening,

irresponsible, or emotionally invulnerable. These images contradict one another, yet each can be activated to discipline behavior. A Black woman who expresses anger at injustice may be dismissed as aggressive; one who remains composed may be expected to tolerate unlimited burden. A Black man may be viewed as dangerous when assertive and weak when vulnerable. Controlling images narrow the range of identities that institutions and audiences are prepared to recognize. They also encourage people to interpret unequal outcomes as evidence of character rather than as products of policy and history.

From Representation to Material Consequence

Media representation matters because it influences public fear, empathy, and policy preference, but images do not operate independently of institutions. Housing segregation, unequal schooling, labor-market discrimination, wealth deprivation, and criminal-legal practices produce concrete differences in opportunity. Cultural narratives then explain those differences in ways that protect the system. Poverty may be attributed to deficient family values rather than exclusion from property ownership and well-paid work. Disparities in arrest may be cited as proof of criminality without examining policing patterns, neighborhood investment, or legal inequality. The relationship is circular: institutions generate unequal outcomes, stereotypes make those outcomes appear natural, and the resulting beliefs justify continued inequality. Breaking the cycle requires policy change alongside changes in representation.

Sexual Stereotypes and the Regulation of Black Women

Racialized sexual stereotypes have subjected Black women to distinctive forms of surveillance and disbelief. The myth of inherent sexual availability has roots in slavery, where it rationalized exploitation and denied enslaved women protection from violence. Its afterlives can influence whether Black women are believed when reporting harassment or assault, how their clothing and motherhood are judged, and whether medical pain is taken seriously. Respectability politics developed partly as a defense, asking Black women to demonstrate moral discipline in order to challenge racist claims. Although such strategies can provide community protection, they may also place the burden on women to disprove stereotypes and marginalize those whose lives do not fit approved standards. Collins's liberatory approach seeks freedom from both degrading imagery and restrictive respectability.

Black Masculinity, Vulnerability, and

Criminalization

Images of Black men as naturally violent or hypersexual have been used to justify surveillance, exclusion, and physical force. The stereotype can make ordinary behavior appear threatening and can obscure vulnerability to victimization, mental distress, or sexual violence. It also pressures some men to perform toughness because emotional openness is treated as unsafe or inconsistent with masculinity. Collins does not argue that Black men are only victims of representation or that sexism within communities should be ignored. She calls for a politics that opposes racism while confronting patriarchal control. Liberatory Black masculinity would not depend on domination of women, rejection of LGBTQ+ people, or imitation of violent stereotypes. It would expand the range of ways Black men can express care, fear, responsibility, creativity, and resistance.

Family, Child Welfare, and Economic Precarity

Racism affects family life through employment, housing, incarceration, health, and public policy. Black families have often been described as defective while the structural conditions that separate or strain families receive less attention. Wage inequality and unstable work can reduce time and resources. Incarceration disrupts relationships and household income. Housing displacement separates extended support networks. Child-welfare surveillance may interpret poverty as neglect while providing insufficient material assistance to keep families together. These conditions are not uniform, and Black families demonstrate diverse structures and substantial resilience. The analytical point is that family outcomes cannot be explained by stereotype. Policy choices shape the risks and resources within which families care for one another.

Health Inequality and Embodied Racism

Racism influences health through unequal access to care, environmental exposure, economic conditions, discrimination, and chronic stress. Residential segregation can affect air quality, food access, neighborhood safety, and proximity to health services. Bias within healthcare can shape communication, pain assessment, diagnosis, and treatment. Repeated anticipation of discrimination may produce physiological strain, but this should not be described as an inherent racial vulnerability. Race is a social and political classification, not a biological cause that automatically creates disease. Public-health research increasingly distinguishes the health effects of racism from misleading claims that Black bodies are naturally deficient. Effective responses require trustworthy care, representative research, anti-discrimination accountability, environmental justice, and attention to the social determinants of health.

Sexual Health, HIV, and the Limits of Cultural Blame

The original essay connected Collins with Carrillo's research on sexuality, migration, and HIV among Mexican men. The comparison is useful only when it avoids claiming that African Americans and Mexicans have identical histories. Carrillo (2002) demonstrates that sexual behavior is interpreted through culture, migration, identity, relationships, and changing social norms. The broader lesson applies to health interventions: information alone is insufficient when programs ignore stigma, power, economic constraints, and how people understand intimacy. In African American communities, HIV prevention should not reproduce stereotypes of sexual irresponsibility. It should address access to testing and treatment, medical mistrust grounded in history, homophobia, gender power, housing, insurance, and community knowledge. Culturally responsive prevention works with people's lived realities instead of treating culture as the problem.

Sarah Baartman and the Colonial Gaze

Sarah Baartman, a Khoikhoi woman exhibited in nineteenth-century Europe, became a lasting symbol of the colonial objectification of African women. European audiences and scientists treated her body as spectacle and evidence for racist classification. After her death, parts of her body remained in a French museum until repatriation to South Africa in 2002. Henderson (2014) examines how Baartman's story continues to shape Black women's identity and representation. The case reveals how scientific authority, entertainment, and sexual curiosity combined to deny personhood. It should not be reduced to a generalized story that all Black women experience in the same way. Its value lies in exposing the historical techniques through which the colonial gaze transformed a person into a racial type and made exploitation appear educational.

New Racism and the Adaptation of Old Ideas

Contemporary racism often avoids openly biological claims while preserving unequal effects through coded language and institutional practices. Terms such as "dangerous neighborhood," "welfare dependency," "urban disorder," or "cultural fit" can activate racial meanings without naming race. Digital media can circulate older stereotypes at extraordinary speed, while algorithms trained on unequal data may reproduce disparities in hiring, credit, policing, or visibility. The "new racism" described by Collins is therefore not entirely new. It adapts historical narratives to formally color-blind environments. Identifying this process requires attention to outcomes, decision rules, and the cultural stories used to explain them. Intentional prejudice is one form of racism, but institutional effects can persist without every participant expressing personal hostility.

Resistance, Knowledge, and Liberatory Politics

African American communities have never been passive recipients of racism. Black feminist thought, civil-rights organizing, labor activism, artistic production, religious institutions, mutual aid, scholarship, and LGBTQ+ movements have created alternative accounts of Black life. Collins emphasizes self-definition because groups subjected to controlling images need the power to produce knowledge about themselves. Liberatory politics cannot consist only of replacing negative images with idealized ones. It must permit complexity, disagreement, pleasure, vulnerability, and different family or sexual identities. It also requires coalitions that challenge racism, sexism, class exploitation, and homophobia together. Representation matters most when connected to changes in institutions and resources.

A Responsible Comparative Approach

Comparisons across Black and Mexican or other marginalized communities can reveal shared mechanisms such as racialization, health inequality, migration control, and sexual stigma. They become harmful when one group's history is used to judge another's political participation or when distinct experiences are collapsed into a competition over suffering. African Americans' history of slavery, Jim Crow, and continuing racial hierarchy is not interchangeable with Mexican migration and racialization. Solidarity begins by recognizing specificity and examining how policies affect groups differently. Carrillo's work can enrich an analysis of sexuality and public health, but it should not displace the African American focus established by Collins. Comparative scholarship is strongest when it identifies relationships without erasing difference.

Conclusion

Racism affects African American lives through a connected system of controlling images, institutional inequality, economic exclusion, bodily regulation, and unequal access to social sympathy. Collins's analysis demonstrates that these effects are gendered and sexualized: Black women and men are constrained by different stereotypes, while class and sexuality further shape experience. The histories of Sarah Baartman and racialized public-health discourse show how representation can support material control, but they also reveal why communities must possess authority over their own stories. Racism is not an inherent feature of Black identity, and disparities should not be mistaken for deficiency. Liberatory politics combines self-definition with institutional change, creating conditions in which Black people can live beyond the narrow roles imposed by racial and gender hierarchy.

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