

10-1-2013

Sexual Racism

Shannon Gupta

Colgate University, sfgupta@colgate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://commons.colgate.edu/upstate_student

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gupta, Shannon, "Sexual Racism" (2013). *Upstate Institute Student Research*. Paper 8.
http://commons.colgate.edu/upstate_student/8

This Report is brought to you for free and open access by the Upstate Institute at Digital Commons @ Colgate. It has been accepted for inclusion in Upstate Institute Student Research by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colgate. For more information, please contact skeen@colgate.edu.

Sexual Racism

*

By Shannon Gupta

Author's Note

I set out to write this piece as part of a literary journalism course at Colgate University. My interest in how black female students experience the Colgate hookup culture stems from watching close friends struggle with sexual racism on campus. As with any sociological study or survey, this piece contains generalizations, but it in no way attempts to claim that the experiences of some or all of the black women quoted is identical to or representative of the experiences of all other black women at Colgate.

My facts and figures were taken from students, professors, the Colgate University website, and Forbes Magazine.

This piece looks at Colgate over the course of the fall 2013 semester.

This work operates under the false but necessary assumption, given its specific focus, that everyone at Colgate is heterosexual.

I am a mixed-race individual of Indian, Nicaraguan, Italian, and Spanish decent. My skin is light.

A very special thank you to Sisters of the Round Table and all of the interviewees for their participation.

The walk down Broad Street after midnight feels like a scene out of a very dark comedy. Above the shouts of drunken sophomore girls and sickly, glass-eyed fraternity pledges, a clammy wind whines overhead. The Broad Street sidewalk, littered with the occasional Key Stone can and red Solo cup, seems never-ending. And as Allison Adams* walks away from the Phi Delta Theta fraternity house, racing to zip up her jacket as her friends wander downtown, an irritated look overwhelms her cheeks. See, at Colgate University, the notions of black and white, girl and guy, become more distinct and glaring as the night goes on. And with a campus of almost three thousand students dancing around their sexual prime, a little bit of alcohol is all it takes for those differences to be made aggressively clear.

“The brothers at the door didn’t say it was because we were black, they just told me and Sarah we couldn’t come in,” Allison, now a senior, recalls. “But they let Mary and Laura in and, I mean, no one knew who any one was at that point – we were all freshman then – so it’s not like it was our personalities they didn’t like. I don’t know what else it could’ve been.” Allison and her friend Sarah Maller* are women of color.¹ Mary Rodriguez* and Laura Loy*, Latina American and Asian American, respectively, are very light-skinned. Although the Colgate

* Indicates a name has been changed.

1 “Women of color” is a term that typically encompasses a wide range of ethnic and racial minorities, from African American to Hispanic to Indian. But this piece, rather than focus on women of a specific ethnicity, looks at the experiences of women within this category who have medium-dark to dark black phenotypes. The decision to focus on phenotype rather than ethnicity stemmed from the fact that, in the hookup culture, individuals tend to select another person based on appearance rather than ethnic background. The decision to focus on the experiences of those with medium-dark to dark-black skin is because my research has shown that darker-skinned women of color tend to be more marginalized in predominantly white, American society than those with lighter, caramel-colored skin.

administration might like to believe otherwise, this kind of “sexual racism” happens all too regularly in 2013.

“Sexual racism” is what I've come to call the phenomenon where white men don't find women of color attractive. Some say it's an innate sexual preference or a societal construction we've been led to internalize, but we'll get to that. This preference poses an issue for black women looking to engage in Colgate's hookup culture² given that 73 percent of Colgate is white, and only 4.2 percent of students consider themselves black³. And on a campus composed of 55.2 percent women and 44.8 percent men, the ratio of women to men tends to lean in favor of men in the hookup culture; specifically, fraternity men. With the exception of the Delta Upsilon fraternity (DU), also known as “The Football Fraternity,” or “The Black fraternity,” (which, in reality, is only around 50 percent black), almost 96 percent of Colgate's fraternities are composed of white upper-middle class brothers. On nearly any night of the week, girls can be found running around their bathrooms, straightening their hair, and heading downtown to the fraternity houses. The brothers there make an effort to keep the guy to girl ratio in their favor, excluding non-brothers from entering their parties. This not only increases their chances of getting lucky, but it keeps the overall sexual power in their hands. It's tricky enough for any woman to navigate such a patriarchal landscape, but Mary and Laura, even as first-years, already have a leg up on

2 “The Hookup culture” is defined as one in which college students engage in random sexual contact, or no-strings-attached sexual encounters. This culture is often more popular with college adults than the traditional committed dating scene. This is because students tend to be busy working on their academics, or still learning about themselves, and do not want to expend the energy necessary to take care of another person on an emotional level. “Hooking up” eliminates this deeper emotional commitment while still enabling students to fulfill their sexual desires. It is not uncommon for two people to attract one another and “hookup” without prior engagement in conversation.

3 “University Demographics 2013-2014.” <www.colgate.edu> .

Allison and Sarah. They, like the vast majority of Colgate's student body, fit one of the key standards for sexual desirability.

Allison is a lean, dark-skinned girl with smooth, sculpted arms and long black hair she usually keeps in cornrows. She has an oval baby-face and a bright toothy smile many women spend hours perfecting with whitening strips. She is a senior now, and like other girls on campus, she has an affinity for oversized sweaters and black leggings. But unlike most other girls on campus, she rarely goes downtown to the fraternities.

“Ever since [that night as a first-year] I've just never felt comfortable at fraternities,” Allison explains. “The Colgate hookup culture in general is horrible. It's definitely detracted from my college experience. And I think it's intensified for girls of color. A lot of the black girls I've spoken to don't think they have the option of being with someone here.”

Allison is not alone with her discomfort. Many black women at Colgate not only feel rejected from the Colgate hook-up scene, but marginalized from the campus culture in general. Sisters of the Round Table (SORT)⁴, a student-run organization dedicated to fostering a welcoming environment in which Colgate women, especially women of color, discuss a variety of social issues, expressed the insecurities they sometimes feel as a racial minority. The club occasionally has one or two male or gender-queer members, but it is overwhelmingly female.

4 Sisters of The Round Table (SORT) is a group for women, particularly women of color to come together and bring to the forefront issues that concern women of color. Here they can voice their opinions and concerns in a safe environment where they will be heard and given feedback. Our mission is to foster a community and group that will allow women to have their concerns voiced but more importantly valued. SORT will provide an outlet for women to create plans of action, activities, and events that will promote awareness on Colgate's campus about issues that affect women on both a local and global level. This group will also serve as a support system for its members, encouraging them to advance in a society where they as women and/or women of color are often marginalized and underrepresented (SORT Constitution – Official Mission Statement).

SORT meets every Wednesday at 5 p.m. in The Center for Women's Studies lounge. During the day, the lounge is framed with armchairs and couches. But the SORT girls re-arrange the furniture in a circle when they meet. Of the club's consistent twenty-four members, less than a quarter are visibly white. All eyes tighten on me as I flip open my laptop and explain my interest in documenting their meeting. You see, Colgate women of color have very few spaces to exist together without whites. The Greek houses, academic quad, dining halls, on-campus apartments and dormitories, and nearly every other area on campus – public and private – are dominated by the homogenous majority. Only in specific corners of Frank Dining Hall, The Africana, Latin American, Asian American, and Native American Cultural Center (ALANA), The Harlem Renaissance Dormitory, the Center for Women's Studies, the football field, and DU do black students tend to dominate.

For this week's icebreaker, the girls are supposed to say their names and what they do to feel happy or empowered. Many of the girls say that doing their hair makes them feel empowered.

“You know, like, when you get a new hairstyle and you're like 'Damn, I look good’” says a black-skinned girl as she sits up in her arm chair. She has wide curves that she emphasizes with body-hugging jeans and a bright red, green, and blue scarf that makes her black camisole pop. Her comment is met with snaps and loud laughter.

“Yeah, I also like getting my hair done, you know,” another girl says, stroking her hair and doing a body wave in her chair. Laughter. “When I go get it done and I walk out and it's soft – yea.” More body waving and laughter. Skip forward fifteen minutes and twenty-two girls.

“OK, did everybody go? OK. So, today we're going to talk about self-love and self-hate,” says senior and co-leader Melissa Melendez as she switches on a PowerPoint presentation. The room erupts with “mhmms” and supportive snaps. Melissa is a witty, energetic Latina girl with caramel-colored skin and Afro-textured black hair. She is very active within the Women's Studies Center, often speaking at its “Brown Bags,” or lunch seminars, where students discuss current events, women's issues, LGBTQ issues, and general societal concerns.

“How do we define self-love?” she asks the group. “Where does self-love come from? Are we defining it internally or externally? How does Colgate affect our self-love? Does gender have an impact?” The first girl to respond is a fit, large-breasted, dark-skinned girl with curly black hair she's pulled back into a ponytail. She's petite but proportional, her black peplum blouse framing her chest and waist.

“I feel like at Colgate – you know, you come to Colgate – and you see a lot of the same things here...you know what it is,” she says, exciting more loud laughter, claps, and understanding nods. “I thought, 'Wow, maybe I should try to fit that,’” she adds, motioning to her un-relaxed hair.

“Yeah, and coming from a diverse high school, it makes you question your difference a lot more here,” adds junior Maya Atakilti, a black-skinned girl with long curly black hair and a fitted black leather jacket. “Coming to a homogenous school makes you question yourself more because your differences are more obvious; no one back home says, 'Look at your Afro!' But being in a place where everyone looks so similar, it makes you look at you very...close. But I like looking different. I never wore my hair natural before I came here.”

“For me, you know, even in high school it was the same demographic,” says sophomore Molly Raymond*. “I’ve always been the only black person in the picture and I was a person who got so uncomfortable with it that, yeah, I did try to lighten my skin with a bunch of soaps and creams, and eventually it got to the point that it wasn’t worth it. But I took the fact that I didn’t see anyone who looked like me and internalized that, like, there couldn’t be a me out there the way I was.”

“I love being different,” says sophomore Isabelle Frey*. “But there are things about me that make me think, ‘Oh, maybe I should be more clean cut or not speak in class,’” she says, referring to her un-relaxed hair and black vernacular. “But actually, Colgate can make me feel awesome for being different.” As I look around the circle at all of the girls, some leaning on each other, or sitting in each other's laps, or playing with each other's hair, I realize just how together they are. They have found, despite Colgate's overwhelmingly white landscape, this space where they can be understood and accepted. By the end of the discussion, they have come to the conclusion that even though they don't fit the white, upper-middle class Colgate stereotype, their differences are something to be proud of.

* * * * *

Where does sexual racism actually come from? Is it an *a priori* preference or does it develop from external forces? Would you be offended if some stud at the bar turned you down for being too dark-skinned? Probably.

“I’m not offended by male preference. I know a lot of guys here, black guys and white guys, don’t like black women and it's just their preference. But I think it might be rooted in more than just what they find attractive. I think it's engrained in society,” says Allison. It is. Colgate

professor of sociology and researcher of race and ethnicity Rhonda Levine, teaches a class every semester called “Race, Racism, and Privilege” that discusses the socioeconomic factors that fuel racism in the United States. According to her hypothesis, my notion of sexual racism is deeply embedded in society.

“There's that stereotype that women of color are loud and loose, so my guess is that they don't feel that they fit in or that they aren't attractive to white men,” explains Levine.

Senior Amanda Law* agrees. Amanda is a thin but curvy petite woman with medium to medium-light black skin, depending on the season, and black hair she never goes downtown to the bars without straightening. She is friends with almost all white women and is lighter-skinned compared to Allison. Just a few months earlier, Amanda personally encountered an instance of sexual racism at a popular downtown bar known as “The Jug.”

“This senior was standing at the bar area with his friends and he ordered a beer and knocked it over as soon as he got it...and I just started laughing at him...and he got really pissed at me for laughing. He saw that *I* was upset that *he* was upset and then he started being really nice to me. The niceness just moved on to flirting. He bought me a drink and then somehow he was like ‘You’re better than all the other white bitches in here.’ And I was really caught off guard. I hadn’t even mentioned race at all. Then later he said that ‘People like me don’t get with people like you.’ I walked away. It was kind of like a ‘Wait, what?’ feeling. I felt good that he was complimenting me because I always thought he was very handsome, but at the same time, it was a backhanded compliment. I felt like it was kind of a hopeless situation because I can’t control the way I look in that aspect.” In general, Amanda's medium-black skin tone and straightened hair allows her to navigate the hookup culture with nearly the same ease as her

white friends. She knows that her black skin works against her, and so, like those few black women in Colgate sororities, she consciously tries to be thin in order to get rid of her stereotypical black-woman-curves and keeps her hair looking smooth like Halle Berry's.

But this issue of lighter-black versus darker-black skin and natural versus relaxed or straightened hair is not even close to a problem for Colgate's men of color. These guys walk through "The Jug" like stars, making eye contact with girls wherever they look and dancing with almost whomever they want. No matter how you view it, these men are practically celebrities with white women.

"Some white women look at them and think, oh, he's an athlete or he looks like a rapper, and they're attracted to that celebrity quality. I would guess men of color are definitely more popular with white women than black women are with white men," Levine says.

"I think that it may have to do with status," Amanda agrees. "A lot of black guys here are in DU and they have this star status. Some girls just want to get with the football players. And black men are associated with a positive stereotype...you know, they're supposedly well endowed," she laughs. "I think that has a lot to do with the attraction. They're the perfect combination of urban and preppy here."

As a result of this discrepancy between how black women and men are treated in the hookup culture, many women of color band together in groups like SORT and create their *own* social scene away from the main-stream culture. In fact, to many white students, SORT is invisible. The SORT members have sleepovers at the Center for Women's Studies and many of

them attend multicultural social events on campus. But not all black women at Colgate feel the need to befriend other like women and restrict themselves to certain spaces.

“I came to Colgate because I wanted to meet different races because I wasn’t used to that. I went to an all-black high school, so that was the reason I actually came to Colgate...was to get away from that,” explains Amanda. “I think, honestly, segregating yourself kind of perpetuates the whole white men thinking black women are only interested in black men, because when you see black girls on campus that aren’t self-segregated – the ones usually in sororities – well, they tend to hookup with a lot of white men!” Some women in SORT disagree with this logic.

“I think it’s great to get out of being friends with just black people, but often we don’t extend that idea of branching out to white people. We say 'Black people self-segregate and need to branch out' but we're not telling white people 'Don’t be friends with white people,’” says senior Renyelle Jimenez.

“When I first got here Professor [Jeff] Spires said that self-segregation is something oppressed people think they need to stop doing but not people on the other side,” adds sophomore Charity Whyte. Whatever the case, even women like Amanda who make a conscious effort to integrate into the majority culture still find themselves sexually frustrated. This is not only because many white men are not interested in black women, but because as Allison puts it, “A lot of black women here just aren't interested in black men.”

“I prefer my two percent milk brothers,” Amanda says with a laugh. “I think it's because when I grew up, I watched shows where there were white families. There weren’t a lot of shows with black people or that centered around young black people and I just became attracted to white guys. My first crush was on Jesse from *Full House*,” she explains. “And I didn’t go to the

best high school per se, so I kind of associated negative stereotypes – like the hip-hop culture – with black men. Personally, I'm not attracted to guys associated with that the whole baggy-pants-ghetto-thing.”

Amanda's preference for white men, while seemingly appearance-based, might lend itself to deeper socioeconomic issues. According to the PEW Research Center, there's actually hard evidence to suggest that there is a real appeal to white men for black women due to the association society makes between lighter skin and higher financial capital.⁵

“We studied black communities in my sociology class and we learned that the more educated a black woman is, the more likely she is to want to date someone of her educational level or above,” Allison says. “And statistically, more black women are educated than black men.” In other words, for an educated black woman, like those at Colgate, marrying a white man equates to “marrying up,” and marrying a black man equates to “marrying down.” On that same token, white men tend to associate marrying a white woman as “marrying up,” and marrying a black woman as “marrying down.” This isn't to say that the black men at Colgate are not as well educated as white men or black women, nor that hooking up is the same as marrying, but it seems that the stereotype is nevertheless engrained. As a result, “African American women are just in nowhere's land,” explains Levine. Not only do black women feel rejected by white men, but generally speaking, their lack of interest in black men gives them essentially no romantic options.

5 Wang, Wendy. “The Rise of Intermarriage.” The PEW Research Center. February 16, 2012. Web. <www.pewsocialtrends.org>.

Laura Hamilton and Elizabeth A. Armstrong, professors at Indiana University, Bloomington and the University of Michigan, respectively, reported on another socioeconomic trend that could explain why women of color are excluded from the Colgate hookup culture. Their 2009 study “Gendered Sexuality in Young Adulthood: Double Binds in Young Adulthood”⁶ found that women of lower-middle class backgrounds are more unlikely to participate in the college hookup culture than their middle-class and upper-middle class counterparts. This is largely due to the pressure placed on lower-middle class women to prioritize their studies and move up the economic ladder. And of course, not all of Colgate's women of color are from lower-middle class backgrounds, but almost one third of the women in SORT said that they consider themselves lower middle-class.

* * * * *

When Melissa asks the members of SORT whether they feel comfortable entering a Greek house, the vast majority say that they do not. Their responses are part of an exercise where the members stand in a circle and Melissa reads out statements like, “I feel comfortable befriending someone of a different religion” or “I believe that men receive more privileges at Colgate than women.” If a member in the circle agrees with a given statement, she steps forward, and those who disagree remain in place.

“I feel comfortable entering a multicultural house or building at Colgate.”

6 Hamilton, Laura and Armstrong, Elizabeth A. “Gendered Sexuality in Young Adulthood. Double Binds and Flawed Options.” *Gender and Society*. Sage Publications, 2009. Web. <www.gas.sagepub.com>.

Everyone in the circle steps forward. ALANA is one of those multicultural buildings. It is advertised as a space where minorities on campus can gather to promote awareness of multicultural activities and events. Like The Women's Studies Center, ALANA hosts frequent Brown Bags. But more than anything, it has become a place where male and female students of color can feel a sense of belonging. Nearly one third of the girls in SORT are also involved in ALANA. To put it simply, the black students who participate in one minority-focused campus group tend to participate in others.

“Has had serious thoughts about leaving Colgate.”

The majority of members move into the circle and one dark-skinned girl sits in the middle of it with her head down and hand stretched to the sky, as if she were preaching. Laughter all around.

“Has hesitated to participate in activities due to financial concerns.”

All but three step forward. No one looks surprised. One such activity – Greek life – can cost its members upwards of five hundred dollars per year. Sororities specifically can cost anywhere from five hundred to eight hundred dollars per year in fees, or “dues,” as they're called, and new members can pay up to eighty-two dollars in first semester dues. This money goes towards formal dances, fund-raising events, house maintenance, social gatherings, and more. Apparel costs extra. While Colgate sororities do offer scholarships to those with financial needs, it is rare for a girl who can't afford one to join; Greek life is for the upper-middle class. Given that more black women at Colgate report being middle- and lower-middle class than white women, it makes sense why only 3 to 5 percent of sororities are black. The consequences of these numbers are that, generally speaking, black women do not have the same opportunities to

meet fraternity brothers as sorority sisters do. Why? Because sororities party with the fraternities on a bi-weekly basis in events known as “mixers.” Moreover, it’s easy to imagine how the blatant socioeconomic divide between Greek students and women of color could stand as an awkward social obstacle.

“Has personally experienced racism at Colgate.”

A wave of sighs hits the room as nearly every girl steps into the circle.