

Sex, Desire, and Identity: Intersections of Sexuality and Race in Social and Romantic Life at
Davidson

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“Exploring my sexuality was kind of hard at Davidson because I was like, I don’t really feel seen.”¹

Daniel Hierro, who graduated from Davidson College in 2017, always felt that at Davidson, “there was there was a lack of diversity within the LGBT community” and “critical analysis of how the gay community can also feed into racism and institutions of oppression of people of color.”² Following broader patterns within the United States during this time, this quote demonstrates that while race and sexuality interacted to influence one’s experience of Davidson’s campus, the ways in which these identities interacted to produce experiences of marginalization were not often critically evaluated on campus. Hierro points out that despite being able to take Gender and Sexuality Studies classes and join queer advocacy student groups such as Queer and Allies (Q&A) and You Are Not a Stranger Here (YANASH), public and social discussions of queerness in the 2010s at Davidson frequently centered and normalized white wealth and avoided discussions of intersectional queer oppression. Through investigating oral histories that center topics related to sexuality and desire at Davidson College alongside other primary sources that discuss the intersections of socialization and sexuality on Davidson’s campus, we can more deeply understand how the intersections of race and sexuality have influenced student experiences of sex, desire, and social life throughout Davidson’s history.

Intersectionality and Sexuality at Davidson

According to Thea Princewell ‘93, Daniel Hierro ‘17, Judy Hooks ‘85, and Wilson Hardcastle ‘93, race and sexuality heavily informed the social and dating scene at Davidson College between the 1980s and 2010s. As a predominantly white college in the South, Davidson has a long history of existing as a space in which resources, respect, and safe spaces were primarily accessible to white, heterosexual, and cisgender students. Scholars of sexuality in the twentieth century make clear that the co-construction of race and sexuality at an institutional level impacted identity, social life, and community building during this era. In particular, John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman argue that changing sexual norms altered “the

¹ Daniel Hierro, interview by Isabel Padalecki, March 27, 2021.

² Ibid.

ways that the erotic served as a method for enforcing inequality,”³ locating racial identity and sexuality as social sites through which power was defined and enacted on those who did not exemplify regulatory ideals of normative sexual and racial identities.

As in the context of the broader United States, race and sexuality served as sites of power and regulation at Davidson College throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. According to both Daniel Hierro and Thea Princewell, racism from white students and faculty limited their full participation as students on campus, both academically and socially. Within the classroom, Princewell was openly discouraged from succeeding at Davidson and in future academic endeavors by her professors. She was so disregarded by her professors, that she did not declare her biology major until three weeks before graduation, and was never assigned to a major advisor. This also extended to and limited her social life, as she remarked that “the opportunities for being social with the opposite sex—not gonna happen at Davidson, not when you're Black, ever.”⁴ For Hierro, 25 years later, Gender and Sexuality Studies classes were available as spaces to discuss intersectional issues regarding race, gender, and sexuality, but he “wished that those conversations trickled more into the social culture.”⁵ For both Princewell and Hierro, the regulatory power that white peers and mentors possessed to steer and regulate even the most progressive campus conversations and social spaces limited their abilities to be recognized as full and authentic participants in the Davidson community. This social atmosphere, then, positioned whiteness as a normalized and idealized identity within the institution’s culture.

Despite this demonstration that race and sexuality have been co-regulated throughout Davidson’s history, one recurring theme within interviews with Davidson alumni is the lack of institutional or social recognition of the intersectional experiences of students marginalized in terms of both race and sexuality. This also holds true at the national level. In his study of the work on the twentieth-century social advocacy group GALA (Gay Latino Alliance), which existed in the 1970s and 1980s in San Francisco,

³ John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 221.

⁴ Thea Princewell, interview by Ross Hickman and Emma Shealy, March 21 2021.

⁵ Hierro.

historian Horacio Roque Ramírez identifies the coalition conflicts and burnout that occurred due to tensions within the group over the extent to which racial or sexual politics should be considered in tandem or whether these forms of oppression could be addressed separately.⁶ These tensions and difficulties observed in broader American history can also be seen in Davidson's history. For example, within the queer student organizations that Hierro engaged with as a student (both YANASH and Q&A), the majority of members were white queer people who prioritized their own representations and experiences of queerness, despite protests and efforts from students of color like Hierro to diversify these spaces and their event offerings. As a result, for Hierro, both connecting fully with a social group and finding a non-white partner became next to impossible, leading him to search for partners and queer friends off-campus. Hierro expresses his frustration with the lack of spaces specifically for queer students of color, stating:

“The Black Student Coalition was just thinking about Black events and the Queers and Allies were just thinking about the LGBT community, but because they were only just thinking about the identity, it ended up being a lot of white LGBT that they were focusing on. Which doesn't really help anybody, because we do have minorities at the school who have intersectional identities.”⁷

Hierro found that as a queer student of color, he and others with similar identities bore the brunt of the responsibility “to make events” that addressed the intersections of racial and sexual marginalization. To Hierro, this burden “[was] exhausting when you think of Davidson as an institute being super rigorous and everyone is stressed out of their minds.” This experience makes clear that despite that race and sexuality have impacted every student's experience of Davidson, it has historically been queer and trans students of color who have experienced limitations of their social and academic lives as a result of this dynamic. For students of color, Davidson's social culture has deemed whiteness as the social norm, creating a campus environment in which spaces for sexual and social exploration were not accessible for students of color, especially those who were also queer.

Racism and Homophobia Within Affinity Spaces

⁶ Horacio N. Roque Ramírez, “‘That's My Place!': Negotiating Racial, Sexual, and Gender Politics in San Francisco's Gay Latino Alliance, 1975-1983,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 12, no. 2 (2003): 224-258.

⁷ Hierro.

As previously discussed, even within specifically queer spaces, racism and white supremacy have remained present throughout much of Davidson College's history. Further, within spaces specifically for students of color, sexual policing persisted. Social spaces that were primarily white and cis-heterosexual, such as Patterson Court, did not offer opportunities for queer people nor people of color to participate in the dating scene. Therefore, spaces where queer students of color could socialize with and experience romance with each other were difficult to access.

Judy Hooks '85, Charles Hooks '83, and Thea Princewell '93 specifically discuss their experiences as members of the Black Student Coalition (BSC) within their oral history interviews. They reported spending most of their social hours attending parties and events hosted by the (BSC) and did not venture to other parts of the social landscape of the campus. Despite that the BSC was the primary social organization for Black students on campus, it was not always an organization that was free from the policing of sexuality. Thea Princewell noted that in her time at Davidson, there was a clear divide between the white and Black dating scenes. When she chose a white boy to take as a date to a social event, the reaction she received was one of scandal from both Black and white students on campus.

According to Princewell:

“It was scandalous, okay? [...] And the Black guys are like, you didn't ask us? I'm like, well, you're not nice to me? I mean, half of you aren't even available anyway, because you have girlfriends. And then the rest of you are mean to me.”⁸

To honor her own process of coming to terms with her asexuality and the complicated dating scene on campus, Princewell stuck to taking white men who later came out as gay as dates, because she wanted to hang out with someone “who's funny, someone who makes you laugh, someone who doesn't stress you out, that's the best date, so they made the best dates, I think because they weren't trying to have sex with me.” Though she experienced sexual policing due to her decision to date outside of her own racial identity, this dynamic allowed her to explore her sexual identity even within the campus norms that encouraged participation in monogamous, romantic unions. Wilson Hardcastle '93, a white Davidson

⁸ Princewell.

alum, also made note of this sexual policing along the lines of race, noting that “it felt like the Black students only could date Black students.”⁹

Themes presented in these oral history interviews speak to the broader co-construction and co-regulation of race and sexuality in the United States. Historian Martha Hodes discusses the roots of this co-regulation of race and sexuality, arguing that historical efforts of white supremacists to prohibit sex and intermingling between white women and Black men demonstrate the usage of sexual regulation to prevent racial mixing and uphold white supremacy by maintaining a system of racial separation.¹⁰ Therefore, we must understand patterns of romantic racial separation in Davidson’s history as part of larger American cultural trends that police racial sexual intermixing in order to maintain the fictions of biological racism that describe whiteness and Blackness as physically separate and construct hierarchies of power out of this separation. In the United States at large and on Davidson’s campus, sexuality can thus be seen as a site and vocabulary that has been used to assuage anxieties about white supremacy through regulation of “deviant” sexualities that cross lines of racial separation and heterosexuality.¹¹

These experiences of sexual regulation on Davidson’s campus were especially pronounced for Black women who attended Davidson as students. In Thea Princewell’s oral history interview, she describes a feeling of presumed sexual availability on account of her identity as a Black woman. Judy Hooks also relays her own experiences with sexual violence and anxiety on campus, recounting an incident in which a group of white fraternity members entered the women’s restroom in her freshman hall while she was showering and harassed her. These experiences are rooted in histories of enslavement and racialized sexual violence in the United States, as many historians have explored the extent to which enslavers regulated,¹² violated,¹³ and created narratives about the supposed sexual deviance of the people

⁹ Wilson Hardcastle, interview by Julia Bainum and Laura Collins, March 25, 2021.

¹⁰ Martha Hodes, “The Sexualization of Reconstruction Politics: White Women and Black Men in the South after the Civil War,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3, no. 3 (1993), 403.

¹¹ D’Emilio and Freedman.

¹² Thomas A. Foster, “The Sexual Abuse of Black Men under American Slavery,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 20, no. 3 (2011): 445-464.

¹³ Foster, 446; Wilma King, “‘Prematurely Knowing of Evil Things’: The Sexual Abuse of African American Girls and Young Women in Slavery and Freedom,” *Journal of African American History* 99, no. 3 (2014):

they enslaved in order to justify enslavement.¹⁴ Wilma King specifically outlines how, during the era of chattel slavery, enslaved Black women and girls became targets for sexual violence and were understood as inherently sexually available to those who claimed ownership of them.¹⁵ Clearly, according to Thea's interview, these racial ideas about sexuality and violence have outlasted the institutions of slavery in American culture, showing up on Davidson's campus even in the late twentieth century.

Reconsidering Space, Resources, and Identity on Campus

Despite the complex ways in which racial and sexual identities and norms have interacted to influence Davidson's social and academic spaces, many oral history interviewees refrained from blaming Davidson on an institutional level for the faults within their social experiences. Despite negative experiences with white students, Judy Hooks said she does not ever remember being afraid for her safety as a Black woman on campus. Thea Princewell pointed out that at the time of her education, Davidson was not prepared to support someone who looked and identified as she did, and she acknowledged how the class structure at Davidson also prevented the college from giving her the aid she needed while she was a student. Daniel Hierro brought up in his interview that despite his struggles, there were several individuals within the administration who helped him feel supported while he attended Davidson. Though these narrators tried to avoid blaming Davidson for its ill-preparedness in supporting multiply marginalized students, they also highlight how larger patterns of oppression at the intersection of sexual and racial identity were reinforced and enacted at Davidson, which resulted in restricted social, romantic, and academic lives for people who experienced marginalization in terms of race, gender, and sexuality.

173-196; Stephanie Jones-Rogers, "Rethinking Sexual Violence and the Marketplace of Slavery: White Women, the Slave Market, and Enslaved People's Sexualized Bodies in the Nineteenth-Century South," in *Sexuality and Slavery: Reclaiming Intimate Histories in the Americas*, ed. Daina Berry and Leslie Harris, 109-123 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018); Brenda E. Stevenson, "What's Love Got to Do with It? Concubinage and Enslaved Women and Girls in the Antebellum South," in *Sexuality and Slavery: Reclaiming Intimate Histories in the Americas*, ed. Daina Ramey Berry and Leslie M. Harris, 159-188 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018); Deirdre Cooper Owens, "Contested Relations: Slavery, Sex, and Medicine," in *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology*, 73-88 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017); David Doddington, "Manhood, Sex, and Power in Antebellum Slave Communities," in *Sexuality and Slavery: Reclaiming Intimate Histories in the Americas*, ed. Daina Berry and Leslie Harris, 145-158 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018).

¹⁴ Owens, 75.

¹⁵ King, 173.

Collectively, these oral history interviews demonstrate how experiences for queer students of color on Davidson College's campus over the last 40 years were undermined by intersectional structures of inequality and oppression. However, these narrators also highlight ways in which they resisted these systems of oppression and found or created spaces for themselves on or off-campus where they could be around people who respected and supported them, creating alternative geographies of Davidson and surrounding areas through which they could fulfill social, social, and sexual needs not fulfilled by the normative social spaces for Davidson students.

Despite the work done to make Davidson more inclusive from the 1980s to 2010s, many of these issues are still prevalent in 2021. Patterson Court and the Armfield Apartments, central social spaces on campus, are still predominantly white and heterosexual. Despite this, groups like the [Monuments Initiative](#), which is pushing for a campus-wide reconsideration of space and resource allocation at Davidson, are working to address these discrepancies. However, it is essential that movements for more inclusive geographies of Davidson are continually informed by historical efforts to make Davidson a more inclusive place, and that they utilize oral histories like those mentioned in this essay to honor and learn from these historical efforts to forge a more inclusive and intersectionality-oriented Davidson.

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