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An Autoethnographic Review of Big Black Penis: Misadventures in Race and Masculinity

G. Corey Carlisle

Amridge University, corey@intimatemarriage.org

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Abstract

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that allows a researcher to universalize their experience of being an individual, thus allowing others to experience their experience, be affected and continue a conversation. *Big Black Penis: Misadventures in Race and Masculinity* (Taylor, 2008) is a book that invites readers into the author's experience as a Black male. As a Black male, I enter into, review, and continue the autoethnography dialogue started by Taylor. *Big Black Penis* is for those wanting to learn about the lived experiences of being a Black man in America.

Keywords

Black Male, African American Men, Black Sexuality, African American Social Aspects, Autoethnography

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An Autoethnographic Review of *Big Black Penis: Misadventures in Race and Masculinity*

G. Corey Carlisle

Amridge University, Montgomery, AL, USA

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that allows a researcher to universalize their experience of being an individual, thus allowing others to experience their experience, be affected and continue a conversation. Big Black Penis: Misadventures in Race and Masculinity (Taylor, 2008) is a book that invites readers into the author's experience as a Black male. As a Black male, I enter into, review, and continue the autoethnography dialogue started by Taylor. Big Black Penis is for those wanting to learn about the lived experiences of being a Black man in America. Key Words: Black Male, African American Men, Black Sexuality, African American Social Aspects, Autoethnography.

Early in my coursework as a doctoral student I was asked to conduct a book review to learn more about the theory and methodology of qualitative research. I could have chosen from the variety of methodologies within qualitative research. I chose to focus on the autoethnography approach.

Autoethnography is a qualitative approach that systematically analyzes (graphy) personal experiences (auto) in an effort to understand cultural experiences (ethno) (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). An autoethnographic work seeks to blend art and science in such a way that allows for the reader to “experience an experience” (Ellis, 1993) as the experience of being an individual is universalized (Averett & Soper, 2011).

Ever mindful of my looming dissertation process, I wanted to review a book that would also aid in my ongoing literature review. As I am studying aspects of Black sexuality, I was excited to come across Taylor's (2008) book *Big Black Penis: Misadventures in Race and Masculinity*.

I almost dismissed the book solely on its main title. I thought it might be some sort of “porn book” and/or not scholarly enough to review. This revealed my own stereotypes, prejudices, and level of reactivity related to Black (male) sexuality. I wondered if my reactions would have been different if instead of “Black” the title referred to a big “White” or “Asian” penis. When I am honest with myself I have to admit that my reactions would likely be different. What does this reveal about the way I have come to think about Black sexuality?

Thankfully, I kept reading and realized that Taylor (2008) spoke about the intersection of race and masculinity in America. In addressing the “Black Penis” he is discussing the social *construction* of Black masculinity in America (i.e., the symbolic penis).

Taylor (2008) boldly exhibits two very sensitive aspects of society: race and sexuality. And while he does not write explicitly as an autoethnographer or even claim to produce a “scholarly” work, he clearly analyzes his personal experiences in an effort to understand the cultural experiences of being a Black man in America. The only

credentials he writes with are his life experiences as a Black male (p. 154). Certainly, this makes him a qualified authority on the subject.

Taylor (2008) wanted to add to a masculine discourse that has been overwhelmingly been told by older White men and, at times, by women. Instead of continuing to let others speak for him Taylor (2008) decided to speak for himself and offer his insight into the complexities of Black masculinity.

As a Black male myself this appealed to me. It has been rare, if ever, in my academic career that I have gotten to hear another Black male give an honest and vulnerable reflection and analysis on their experience as a Black man. Could his story speak to me? Would our stories have similar themes? And would he be able illuminate cultural dynamics that I had not been aware of or been able to articulate myself?

Taylor (2008) demonstrates that “men learn how to be men by observing their fathers being men” (p. 9), and how a man’s foundation should be his relationship with his father. However, for many Black men this has not been the case. Taylor (2008) is very candid about his absentee father and experiencing his traditional male milestones with women instead of his father. He tells of first growing pubic hair and the intense look of fear on his mama’s face when he showed her, of learning how to shave by practicing on a hooker’s legs (one of his mother’s alcoholic friends and his “second mom”), and learning how to swim from another one of his mama’s friends (pp. 13-15).

I was grateful to have my father present in my home growing up. Still, Taylor’s (2008) experience resonates with me. I often longed to have a closer relationship with my father as I was coming of age. My father was raised in a single-parent mother-led home and so I reasoned that he never learned from his father how to have those meaningful father-son moments. As such, it was my mother who was the most open about addressing the sexual development of me and my two brothers.

The longing for a father fueled Taylor’s (2008) search for meaningful connections with another males. “If I couldn’t have a father, at least I could have a best friend, right?” (p. 23). Part of this was also his craving for nonsexual physical contact from other men (p. 37). While desiring this, Taylor (2008) found he had no idea how to ask for it appropriately. Outside of music, women, and cars many male relationships do not entail multidimensional dynamics and meaningful conversations about life, death, religion, and dreams (pp. 39-40).

A man showing genuine masculine affection and touch is often highly suspect (of not being a “real” or “full” man). This seems all the more true for Black men who have had their masculinity questioned and degraded throughout American history of slavery and oppression. Taylor (2008) notes, “Having had our manhood shaped and reshaped dozens of times over, we can’t even stand the thought of not being able to be a ‘full man’” (p. 38). He goes on to question, “Have our egos and self-images been so corrupted that we can’t live our lives without questioning our own (or our friends’) sexuality in the process” (p. 40)? For many men the answer has been “yes” as they shun anything appearing “soft,” distancing themselves from the very (masculine) intimacy they crave.

Full of insecurities Taylor (2008) figured that sex would be the answer to all his problems. When feeling insecure in their masculinity many men turn to sex in a desperate attempt to prove their masculine worth (Philaretou & Allen, 2003; Taylor, 2008). To be sure, this insecurity can stem from a number of life’s spheres; Philaretou and Allen

(2003) note occupational failures, while Taylor (2008) highlights failures in romantic relationships:

So many of us men who have been dumped believe that we can rebuild the walls of our masculine castle by having as much indiscriminate sex as possible. I guess we feel that since we were so emasculated, the only way to reclaim that lost masculinity is by plumbing the depths of the feminine, spelunking for that (imagined) banished part of us, in hopes of becoming whole. (p. 51)

Taylor (2008) now admits, after breaking many hearts, that sex is powerful and sacred, much beyond just a physical act; he states, "lovemaking is one of the only true forms of magic left in this world" (p. 52) and goes on to suggest that sex is much better when one is in a committed relationship (p. 53).

It is refreshing to see Taylor (2008) take an honest look at his past, expose his insecurities and how he turned to sex to answer his problems. It has been my experience that many men stay at this have-as-much-sex-as-I-can-to-prove-I-am-a-man phase and never discover as Taylor (2008) did the power and sacredness of sex that becomes more profound in a committed relationship.

Another enlightening aspect in Taylor's (2008) story was in how he revealed that even from the young age of eleven he was taught that women of color were not to be desired:

I was under the misguided impression that the boobies of dark women were functional, had specific tasks to perform, but White Girl Boobies were something else entirely. Kind of like museum pieces, you know, works of art. (p. 87)

As a point of triangulating, Mura (1996) demonstrates that this standard of White beauty plays out in other minority groups as well. He is a third-generation Japanese American and wrestles with how to share elements of his story to his daughter:

How, for instance, can I talk to my daughter about sexuality and race? My own experience is so filled with shame and regret, is so full with incidents I would rather not discuss, it seems much easier to opt for silence. Should I tell her of how, when I look at her mother, I know my desires for her cannot be separated from the way the culture has inculcated me with standard of white beauty? Should I tell her of my own desires for "hallucinatory whiteness," of how such a desire fueled in my twenties a rampant promiscuity and addiction to pornography, to the "beautiful" bodies of white women. (p. 12)

Very candidly Taylor (2008) admits it took him a long time to find Black women desirable (p. 94). Mura (1996) went on to marry a White woman. The actions of many of my Black male peers would suggest that they too would conform to this standard and desire of White beauty. However, for me, the ubiquitous White female made Black

women all the more desirable. Maybe this is part of that whole “exotic becomes erotic” thinking.

As part of my study into Black sexuality, this review tended to focus on aspects of social sexuality and erotic sexuality. Taylor (2008) addresses other aspects of his story such as poverty, violence, and self-hatred. From an autoethnographic stance, his story about being shot did not seem to illuminate a cultural experience of being a Black male. It was a moving personal story about transformation, but an analytical evaluation that would connect it back to the broader culture of Black men seemed to be lacking. Is it to speak to a transformation attribute in the development of Black masculinity?

With Taylor (2008) I have experienced the anxiety, fear, and confusion, and consequently the beauty and strength, that being a Black man in America brings. While very different on the surface, Taylor’s story resonates with me because our core experiences are similar. Even when our conclusions rivaled each other (e.g. our desirability of Black women) it was related to a similar phenomenon (i.e. society’s standard of White beauty). It brings me comfort to be connected to and included in a broader cultural experience, though it is bittersweet knowing that other Black men share similar struggles and joys in their masculine development.

Part of the struggle is that I have to constantly stand against the forces which try to put all Black men in a box. Taylor (2008) rightly points out that while Black men share similar core experiences, “this culture is not monolithic” (p. vi); there is a lot of diversity present. However, both from society at large and even within the Black community, Black men are met with certain expectations.

For example, Black men are apparently not expected to be educated. It never ceases to amaze me the surprise reactions others have when they learn that I am educated. It seems as if they have to take a moment to process that as a reality.

It takes strength to stand against the expectations of others and let my own core values and beliefs be my guide in defining what it means to be a Black man, even at the risk of being considered a “sell out” among my peers. This gives me the freedom to fully embrace my Black masculinity and sexual nature. With the freedom comes great joy.

It is high time for more Black men to join this conversation and change the way we view our sexuality, no longer allowing it to be sullied by the negative stereotypes so pervasive in American history and culture. “We must keep the Black Penis healthy and erect . . . it is a force for love and community building” (p. 150). In the end, *Big Black Penis* (Taylor, 2008) is for those wanting to “experience an experience” of being a Black male. It is a work that will affect others and keep a conversation going, able to advance the dialogue of research and clinical practice.

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Author Note

G. Corey Carlisle, M.Div. is a doctoral student in the Marriage and Family Therapy program at Amridge University. His research interests include Black sexuality, sexual script development, and gender role development. Corey is a counselor at Building Intimate Marriages specializing in marital and sexual issues. Correspondence regarding this review can be addressed to G. Corey Carlisle at: Building Intimate Marriages, 1325 Satellite Blvd., Suite 102, Suwanne, GA 30024. Email: corey@intimatemarriage.org

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