



You may be wondering what dildos have to do with race in the United States. Dildos, which are objects that are usually plastic or rubber, shaped to resemble penises, and sometimes equipped to vibrate, are one of the many objects that people use to express discourse. *Discourse* is a specific type of practice through which we communicate messages to and about one another. For instance, when you turn on your television and are bombarded with messages about what to wear, how to act, how to understand the events in your community and the world, and how to incorporate all of this information into your daily life, you are hearing and engaging in the practice of discourse. These messages lay the foundation for how we differentiate what is normal from what is abnormal (Foucault 1990). That is, we mold our perception of the world and our system of categorization around the discourse that we encounter in our lives. And it's discourse that pops up everywhere and seeps into the construction of things that seem relatively innocuous—even dildos.

I examine how discourse is used in the construction and packaging of dildos to portray black men as hypersexual and sexually aggressive. Messages of black male hypersexuality are articulated through the construction of black dildos that are larger and more graphic than their white counterparts. Think about this: If someone asked you which racial group has the largest penis, on average, which one would you pick? You would probably say black men, and you would not be alone. However, the average American penis, regardless of race, is about 5.1 inches long (Kimmel and Messner 1998). So why does this

myth exist, and more importantly, what are its consequences? To answer this question, I looked at phallic representations within the adult novelty industry (i.e., dildos). My hope was to understand how, where, and why the myth of the super-huge black penis exists and to uncover the racist assumptions that underlie this notion.

Racist Discourse: Its Roots and Uses

Q: What's white and twelve inches?

A: Nothing. (From *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies* by Patricia A. Turner, 1994: 21.)

The roots of modern racist discourse regarding black male hypersexuality and the super-huge black penis are found in the writings of fourteenth and fifteenth century English authors (Pieterse 1992). These authors promoted ideas of racial deficiency and inadequacy to justify policies of enslavement, colonization, and the brutal treatment of black people. "Proof" of black men's inherent inferiority and dangerous sexual tendencies was provided in these works through assertions that African penises were abnormally large. These authors considered large genitalia unholy, signifying a closeness with animals and filth and a departure from spirituality, humankind, and God. Never mind that these claims lacked anatomical support.

In the United States, white southern slave owners who defended the institution of slavery reassured themselves of the "rightness" of slave ownership by insisting that the slave master was "enlightened," "humane," and "Christian," and that the slave was a savage creature that "needed"

the direction and control of slavery to discipline his or her sexual urges" (Takaki 1993:113). Fears of interracial sexuality only increased the need to justify the oppression of blacks in the United States. The eugenics policies that emerged early in U.S. history reflected the beliefs of many white people, our "founding fathers" included, who viewed blacks as the "libidinous race" (Takaki 1993:74). These policies forbade the intermingling of the races to ensure that the white race would remain "pure" and superior. Black men, in particular, were targeted by these policies because, as Thomas Jefferson explained, they were thought to prefer the beauty of white women to "those of [their] own species" (Takaki 1993:75).

The late 1800s in the United States were marked by an increase in white hysteria over black sexuality. This fear, in part, represented the insecurities of white southern males during reconstruction who faced a declining economy and vulnerability in the new market. Black men, therefore, became a target for white males who feared a loss of power. The result was the circulation of rape myths and the subsequent lynching of thousands of black men (D'Emilio and Freedman 1988). For example, "between 1889 and 1899 a person was lynched every other day, and in nine cases out of ten the victim was a Black who had been accused of rape" (Pieterse 1992:177).

Today's media have become the sites where discourse about the sexual perversion and dangerousness of black men is articulated. Here we see individuals like Mike Tyson and O. J. Simpson held out for public display as emblems of black male sexual rage and hypermasculinity (hooks 1995).

Media representations of black males tend to portray them as defendants and lawbreakers, while their white counterparts are represented as law-abiding and heroic individuals (Dixon and Linz 2000). These types of representations influence our expectations and make images of black criminality seem normal (Peffley, Shields, and Williams 2000). Consequently, these portrayals go relatively unchallenged even as they subtly

and not so subtly influence policy decisions. For example, racial framing by the media can influence the allocation of resources or the support of policy initiatives that would benefit mostly minority populations. Moreover, these images can result in the brutal treatment and subjugation of a group of people who do not hold the power or resources to counter a discursive attack. Patricia Hill Collins explains that:

Because the authority to define societal values is a major instrument of power, elite groups, in exercising power, manipulate ideas. . . . They do so by exploiting already existing symbols or creating new ones. These controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life. (2000:69)

Discourse, therefore, is a means of controlling the behavior of individuals or groups by defining what is normal and what is not, what is acceptable and what is not, and who can fill the definition of normal and acceptable. Those who do not want to or cannot conform to the standards set by the dominant group within a society are labeled deviant or abnormal.

Taken together, the history of racist sexual discourse, the media's reliance on racist notions in its portrayal of black men, and the consequential control and institutionalization of racism, marginalize black men and label them as deviant and dangerous. These notions erase the history and reality of racism in the United States and reassure those in power of the rightness and justness of their position.

This is not to say, however, that a marginalized group cannot adopt the discourse targeted against it as a means of empowerment. Just as the gay and lesbian community has reclaimed the symbol of the pink triangle from its past use by Nazis, other groups have also adopted oppressive images and discourse into their identities (Elman 1996). Many cultural products, such as rap music and graffiti, draw on oppressive discourses used to marginalize people's voices to create a body of discourse

that undermines dominant discourse and controlling imagery (Rose 1994). For example, [Public Enemy's] "Fight the Power" stood as an anthem against oppression and marginalization throughout the 80s and well into the 90s. This subversion creates a space for self-definition and expression within marginalized communities.

The Dildo: From Rx to XXX

The social meaning of the dildo has changed over time. Once a treatment for hysteria or womb disease, the dildo has become a purely sexual toy and a lucrative commodity.

Dildo usage to massage the genitals of women to produce an orgasm was a common treatment for hysteria in the seventeenth century. Doctors believed hysteria caused nervous disorders, mental illness, fatigue, and a host of other female afflictions (Maines 1999). Because societies of the West constricted the definition of proper sexual acts to those focused on the penetration of the vagina by the penis, and because masturbation was considered unchaste, the problem of alleviating hysteria through female orgasm was left to science. Medicalizing the female orgasm sanitized it (Maines 1999). However, the old techniques of genital massage were tiresome, time-consuming, and difficult to master. To answer the calls of physicians trying to increase their income, the mechanical vibrator was invented. It did in minutes what might have taken the doctor an hour (Maines 1999). Moreover, now midwives or nurses who monitored the machines could more easily perform the treatment. At last, it seemed doctors had an answer to their problems—or did they?

As technological advancements made the vibrating devices more compact and easier to power and as the price for a device became more affordable, people began purchasing machines for home use. This took the vibrator out of the doctor's office and placed it discreetly into patients' bedrooms (Maines 1999). The advertising industry began to market vibrators for home use and the

vibrator began to lose some of its legitimacy as a purely medical device. Following the removal of hysteria as a disease in the mid-twentieth century and the sexual revolution of the 60s and 70s, the dildo or vibrator was exclusively promoted as a sexual toy rather than as a medical device.

Methodology

In this project, I began with the hypothesis that discourses about black male hypersexuality are reflected in the marketing of dildos within the adult novelty industry, and that these discourses are part of a hegemonic racist discourse found in the United States. But how do you test something like this?

I decided to do a content analysis of adult novelty manufacturers' catalogues. Content analysis is a method of research in which the researcher examines the content of some form of media, such as newspapers, books, catalogues, magazines, television, and movies, to establish "who says what, to whom, why, how, and with what effect" (Babbie 2001:305). I obtained 17 catalogues from nine different manufacturers, which contained a total of 401 useable dildos. I looked at the dildos and their packaging to see if there was a significant difference between light and dark toned dildos. I only looked at dildos that resembled a skin tone and then categorized those tones along a continuum that went from pure white to pure black. Using this method, I determined the relationship between the size and the color of the dildos included in my sample.

Findings

The darker dildos in my sample were significantly longer, wider, and more graphic than the lighter dildos. The average length of the darker dildos was almost 1.25 inches longer than the lighter ones, and there were far more dark dildos that fell into the category of wide girth. Moreover, the darker dildos were constructed to have more details, such as pubic hair, scrotums, and veins,

than the lighter dildos in my sample. These findings support the cultural belief that black men have larger penises than white men. In addition, they suggest that darker skin is associated with more animal or corporal urges. It seems that dildos, much like the Barbie doll, are constructed to reflect the beliefs that we hold about certain groups of people. And the dildos included in my study seemed to provide a caricature of the bodies of a marginalized group in society that does not have a powerful amount of influence on the dominant forms of discourse articulated through social artifacts.

The words used on the packaging to describe the dildos in my sample were perhaps the most interesting element of my study. The following are some examples of the types of phrases used on the packaging of the light and dark dildos included in my sample:

Dark

- "You Need a Thick, Long and Massive Ebony Cock . . . You want BAM! Huge Realistic Cock"
- "Black Thunder 12 Thick Inches"
- "Midnight Vibe; Powerful and Soft Jelly Vibes—Midnight G"
- "Bad Boyz Know How to Do It! Bad Boyz 8" Vibrating Devil Dong. . ."

Light

- "It bends to please"
- "Pumping . . . Pleasure Cocks"
- "Rotating 9 inches of Thick, Firm Pleasure"
- "Experience the Ultimate Cyber Orgasm"
- "Exciting Shape"

The phrases used to describe the darker dildos reify notions of black hypersexuality and abnormally large penis size. Words like *bam*, *massive*, and *devil dong* suggest that there are dangers inherent to black sexuality, in contrast with the words used to describe the lighter dildos included in my study, which emphasize pleasure and eroticism. *Orgasm*, *pleasure*, and *exciting* do not invoke the same imagery as the words used on the

packaging of the darker dildos. The words used on the packaging of the dildos reinforced the notion that black sexuality is aggressive, hyperactive, and dangerous, whereas white sexuality is sensual, exciting, and enjoyable.

Even more surprising were the words used by the manufacturers in the catalogues to distinguish between different colored dildos. Fifty-three percent of all of the light dildos were described as flesh colored or natural, while 78 percent of all of the darker dildos included in my sample were described as black. This finding indicates the assumption that white people are the norm and that their skin tone is natural, whereas other skin tones represent some deviation from the norm. In other words, white people are just people, while everyone else is raced (Dyer 1997:1).

As far as the colors and patterns on the packaging, I found the strongest association between black packaging and darker dildos. This may indicate that there is another type of marking going on. In our culture, the color black tends to signify evil, death, and danger. By using black as the dominant color of the packaging, darker dildos were marked as something dangerous and perhaps sinful.

Analysis

I found the clear presence of a discourse that marked darker tones as abnormal and lighter tones as normal to be the strongest evidence that racist discourse has seeped into something as unexpected as a dildo. The use of this discourse in the construction of dildos, whether intentional or not, promotes the idea that black male sexuality is dangerous but controllable and possessible by the women and men who buy these dildos. Moreover, these dildos are constructed to reinforce the stereotype of the "big black cock," which supports the ideas that black men are sexually aggressive. Portraying darker dildos as longer, wider, and more graphic, and using terms and colors to emphasize these things, does not alone instill racist notions of black male sexuality into the minds of

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the public. Rather, it is the interplay of this construction of darker dildos along with the racist discourse that is rooted in the imperialist history of the West as well as the institutionalization of racism that reify notions of black hypersexuality into our psyches.

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