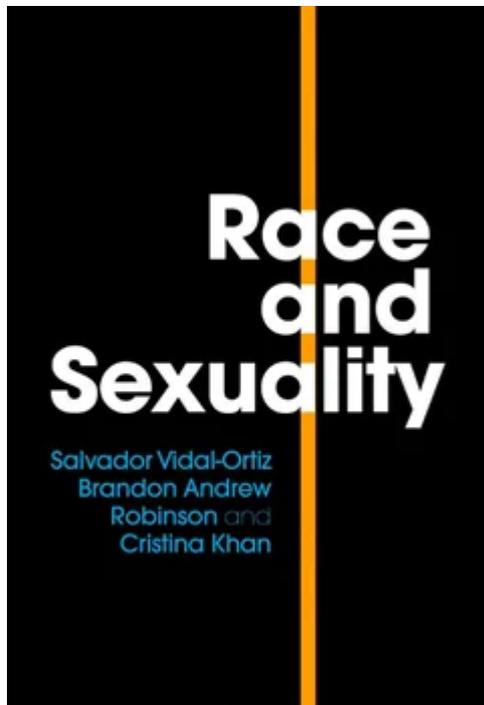


## REVIEWS

# Race and Sexuality by Salvador Vidal-Ortiz, Brandon Andrew Robinson & Cristina Khan

Reviewed by Katalin Halász

11th July 2019



Salvador Vidal-Ortiz, Brandon Andrew Robinson and Cristina Khan

*Race and Sexuality*

Policy Press, 2018

Race, gender, class, sexuality. Add religion and nationality to the list and you have the basic study blocks of a first-year sociology undergraduate course on social theory. We teach and think in these core sociological terms and seldom produce a thorough analysis on how they co-constitute social divisions. Intersectionality enables critical thinking on their interplay but more often than not we develop singular analyses that foreground one as being more important than the other. The authors of *Race and Sexuality* address this limitation in social research head on. They offer a rigorous overview of the disciplines that have grappled with ideas of race and sexuality to elucidate the uneven success of a

wide range of literature in capturing their intertwined relationship. The book not only unpacks and illustrates the complex interconnection between race and class readings on one hand and gender and sexuality on the other but proposes *racialized sexualities* as a new area of study altogether.

What the authors see as a major shortcoming in an extensive list of disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, history, political science, geography, critical race studies, feminist and gender studies, queer studies, English, American studies and so on, is how sexuality is often erased in conceptualizations of racial formations, and vice versa, studies on sexuality or sexualization lack to interrogate race and processes of racialization. Intersectionality has begun to address some of these lacunas, but the authors argue that more work needs to be done to “further unpack the various positionalities and experiences of non-black women, expanding to trans women of colour and other social locations” (2018, 40). Building heavily on queer-of-colour scholarship and critique of heteronormativity and “white hetero-patriarchy” (2018, 41) that operates through the inter-constitution of race, gender, sexuality and class inequalities, the book convincingly proposes *racialized sexualities* as a term able to expand on the intersectionality framework by incorporating the experiences of “cisgender women and trans women of colour, immigrants and transnational groups of people” (2018, 42).

This challenge of thinking through the efficiency of available concepts to comprehensively engage with individuals' and groups' shifting social positionings is the major contribution of *Race and Sexuality*. It does so by an intriguing set of contemporary examples, ranging from international human rights to the “MILF (mother I'd like to f\*\*\*)” (2018, 104) phenomenon. The book is structured in two parts. Part I, Discourses of Race/Sexuality, sets out the conceptual framework of the arguments through a discursive, structural and everyday level of analysis. The two chapters in this part open with an intervention from Kimberlé Crenshaw at the 2016 annual meeting of the American Sociology Association, on police brutality against women of colour. This vignette serves as an introduction to the urgency of the key themes of the book and also to argue that sexuality is often left behind on works addressing racialized and gendered violence. The authors then put forward their purpose of their work “to advance a more focused understanding of the notion that racialization is always already sexual, and sexualization is always already raced” (2018, 26). This statement is supported throughout the book by engaging examples, case studies and ‘spotlights’. The first of these spotlights is on the concept of the ‘down low’, as an example of the construction of a particular race-based sexual discourse in every day life. Originating from a 2003 *New York Times* article by Benoit Denizet-Lewis, the ‘down low’ denotes black men who identify as heterosexual but have sex with other men. In this stereotype racial and sexual identity is combined to construct gay men as white and effeminate, whereas black sexuality as necessary heterosexual to the point when black men who have same-sex desires must follow them through in secret.

These spotlights are as rich as the book's theoretical foundations and enable the immediate translation of *racialized sexualities* into everyday practices. And while the examples are mainly US based, they are relevant and are easily adaptable to other locations. Part II, Transnational, Local, and

Global Sexual/Raced Messages, includes three chapters on human rights, sex work and immigration, each supported by spotlights. “Transnational human rights” (2018, 69) are defined as the ways in which the discourses and implementation of human rights are influenced globally and most importantly by the relationship of the Global North and Global South defined by imperialism and colonization. The spotlight on “the MILF phenomenon” (2018, 109) in the chapter on sex work, in *Racing Sex Work*, underlines how whiteness figures in tandem with age to create a sense of control and agency for white women over white men, a defying of gender roles that is however not accessible for women of colour. In the chapter on immigration, in *Sexualizing Immigration*, the authors take issue not only with existing scholarship, but also with activist and policy work that separate migration from race, gender and sexuality and argue convincingly that “now, more than ever, it is important that the connections between the racialized and sexual are made visible, so as to propose forms of resistance to the conservative backlash in many parts of the world” (2018, 142).

Beyond its theoretical challenge, a striking feature of the book is that it appeals to activist and non-academic audiences as well, who will find it useful as a tool to address and understand their own fluid and intersecting identities. Indeed, at one point the authors directly call on the reader: “we expect that, in reading through these pages, you will consider and evaluate your own knowledge of cases of racialised sexualities in order to further show how race and sexuality are intertwined” (2018, 21). It is a call to “thinking anew” (2018, 21), which we all are required to do if we are to understand the complexities of our inner and outer worlds.

## About the authors

### Salvador Vidal-Ortiz

Salvador Vidal-Ortiz (Ph.D.) is Associate Professor in the sociology department at American University (AU), in Washington, DC. Besides co-authoring *Race & Sexuality*, he coedited *The Sexuality of Migration: Border Crossings and Mexican Immigrant Men* and *Queer Brown Voices: Personal Narratives of Latina/o LGBT Activism*. He tweets @SVidalOrtiz.

### Brandon Andrew Robinson

Brandon Andrew Robinson is an Assistant Professor of Gender and Sexuality Studies at the University of California, Riverside. As a queer studies scholar, Dr. Robinson broadly focuses their work on studying non-heteronormative gender and sexualities.

### Cristina Khan

Cristina is a Lecturer at Stony Brook University. Her research and teaching interests include: feminist methodologies, sexualities, race/ethnic studies, body/embodiment, Latina/o/x studies, qualitative methods, sex work, and women of color feminisms. She is co-author of *Race & Sexuality* (Polity Press,

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## About the reviewer

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Katalin Halász is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow on the Politics of Patents European Research Council funded research project at Goldsmiths, University of London. She has been awarded a Leverhulme Early Career Research Fellowship at Brunel University (2021-2024) with a new research project entitled 'Affective whiteness: racializing Hungarian national identity'. She tweets @am\_vis.

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