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**Sex & Sexuality in *Random Family***

One of the defining characteristics of an individual, and a culture as a whole, is the sexual experience of the individual. The major differences in the sexual experience and identities of the women in Adrian Nicole LeBlanc’s novel, *Random Family,* create one of the key cultural components that clearly differentiate the inner city culture from the dominant suburban culture of main-stream America. In the ghetto, the young girl is often seen as a sex object at a very early age, so unfettered promiscuity and mature sexual identities appear at a much younger age in the ghetto than elsewhere in our society. Virginity and sex are not sacred in the ghetto in *Random Family*, and are instead used as tangible assets, in order to obtain control, power, and envy.

Now, we know that ideas about sex and sexuality can vary widely depending on where one lives. The social mores and cultural norms attached to sex and sexuality in the Bible Belt region of the America might differ greatly from those in the southwestern United States. But, overall, we have certain standards of sexual conduct with minors that are common to the vast majority of regions in the United States.

We tend to remove or eliminate minors from situations, relationships, or even innuendo that might be remotely sexual in nature. We do this because we find it necessary to protect children from the adult consequences of sexual activity and because, for the most part, it’s the law.

However, sexual identities in Adrian Nicole LeBlanc’s book are developed at very young ages, and with attributes of maturity, from the individual and the community, that far exceed our general expectations of childhood sexuality.

In the very beginning of the novel, LeBlanc writes of Jessica, “A sixteen-year-old Puerto Rican girl with bright hazel eyes, a huge, inviting smile, and a voluptuous shape, she radiated intimacy wherever she went. You could be talking to her in the middle of the bustle of Tremont and feel as if lovers’ confidences were being exchanged beneath a tent of sheets.” (3)

LeBlanc writes that “she radiated intimacy wherever she went.” It is unusual for any woman in our culture to have such a powerful presence; we usually reserve that kind of description for movie stars and models. It’s even more abnormal that a young girl exudes such a strong presence of sexuality.

One could argue that a handful of teen-aged girls, famous teen-aged girls, have had the same mature sexual presence: Traci Lords was a much revered, sixteen-year-old, porn actress in the 1980s; there was the infamous coverage of the media counting down the number of days until actress Lindsay Lohan turned eighteen.

The same countdown happened for pop-star Britney Spears. However, these images of the teen-aged sex icon are generally rare and limited to media personalities.

The young girl as a sex object is certainly not socially and publicly flaunted in our society like it is in *Random Family*. LeBlanc writes of a fourteen-year-old Coco: “Her body had long generated unspoken acknowledgements. But now she entered the dangerous age, stepped into the open marketplace, and the desire behind men’s eyes came out in compliments and crude remarks. Smooth offers chased appraising glances.” (34)

Coco is fourteen years old when she enters the “dangerous age.” Not only did men in the ghetto desire this fourteen year old girl, but they actually made some pursuit of their desires with compliments and crude remarks.

Milagros tells Jessica that her twelve-year-old daughter, Serena has it bad with the boys. Milagros says, “She got a body and a half.” (302)

Even as a mother and a concerned girlfriend, Coco seems to be able to reason with the understanding of this outlook on sexuality.

She prepares to confront her twenty-seven year old boyfriend about a possible affair with a fourteen year old girl, which disturbs her very much. But she still reasons, “What man isn’t going to want a hot little ass walking into your door delivering a plate of homemade food?” (313)

In suburban culture, a man making sexual advances toward a fourteen-year-old girl would warrant a call to the police. In suburban culture, the idea that a twelve year old girl could have “a body and a half” is ludicrous. And not many people would even vaguely to try reason that a twenty-seven year old man would be involved with a fourteen year old girl. In the novel, these things are the norm.

Virginity is generally thought of as something precious to young women in our society, and the decision to “lose” one’s virginity usually becomes a shaping and defining moment in a young woman’s life.

The cultural variant for girls in the ghetto is quite a bit different. LeBlanc writes, “The high days of virginity put a girl in demand. For the girls, it was not simply a state but an asset that gave them a rare and coveted form of power; virginity could put sneakers on your feet.” (33)

Virginity is a *rare* and tangible asset for girls in the ghetto. It becomes less of a defining personal trait, and more of an asset for trade: trade for attention, trade for power, and trade for goods.

It cannot be overstated that the “tangible asset” aspect of virginity is certainly not a cultural norm in suburban society. In fact, using virginity as a tangible asset would not even be a consideration except within the most ludicrous or despicable scenarios and under the most deplorable conditions.

At one point in the novel, LeBlanc writes that the older women of the ghetto would warn the girls about men’s sexual appraisals. Coco makes note that “…the women’s warnings sounded like jealousy, as if they wanted their dire predictions to come true. They seemed eager for the girl to lose what made her powerful.” (34)

The idea that the older women of the ghetto wanted the girls to lose their “virgin powers,” is a cultural variant that is so far out, that it probably requires an extended analysis by professional anthropologists to be explained.

Although it is sometimes said that *women* use sex and their sexuality to get what they want, it is almost never said that *girls* do. But LeBlanc writes of sixteen-year-old Jessica, “She dressed even to go to the store. Chance was opportunity in the ghetto, and you had to be prepared for anything.”(3)

It is certain that Jessica learned this tactic from Lourdes, who learned it from her mother. LeBlanc writes: “ ‘My mother used to tell me, “Take the mens for what they got,” ’ Lourdes recalled. ‘If I woulda used my figure and my beauty, I wouldn’t be in the Bronx, honey. I would be in a mansion, living.’ Her logic was convoluted, but it got a deeper truth: both mother and daughter had often used their looks to get by, but that only made the times when they hadn’t more meaningful to them.” (363)

Coco says: “Sometimes money was the main reason girls had sex with boys.” (291)

In the ghetto, using sex or sexuality to gain something tangible, is not unheard of, or even frowned upon. It may be true that outright trading of sex for money is seen as uncouth in inner-city culture, but being an opportunist cannot be seen in a bad light.

In main-stream culture, sex is not generally for sale. One could argue that prostitutes sell sex, but prostitutes are not representational of suburban America.

In the ghetto, sex is outright traded for anything. LeBlanc writes: “One of George’s block managers got sex from a girl for allowing her to sit in his car - without even having to take her driving. Other girls gave it up for a pair of sneakers, or a pack of Pampers, or cigarettes, or a take-out meal. Sex was currency.” (54)

The money-for-sex exchange is encouraged in various ways by many of the women in the novel. In addition to encouraging Jessica to get by on her looks, Lourdes practically sells her daughter to Boy-George. “Like her daughter, Lourdes recognized an opportunity when she saw one…. George understood the cue: he gave Lourdes some high-quality cocaine and $1,000.” (19)

Lourdes’ behavior may seem extreme, but George had seen this in the Bronx before. “It wasn’t the first time he’d heard a defensive response like hers, *Baby you can keep my daughter out all night*.” (19)

Foxy, Coco’s mother, believed that Coco should barter her sex for money. “Foxy believed that Wishman’s sudden discovery of his two year old daughter was simply the most direct route to getting Coco into bed, and that Coco ought to get money from Wishman while she could.” (291)

Perpetuating what she’d learned from her mother, Coco tells Serena to get what she can from boys. “Take all he gives.” (369)

Sex and sexuality are very powerful forces. The introduction of these forces at a much younger age than is normally found elsewhere changes the entire sexual identity that these individuals have. According to Sigmund Freud, the entire psyche of the human being is centered around sexuality. Freud notwithstanding, sexuality is a major factor that defines the individual.

It is also understood, and well known, that teens and young adults will start having sex at varying ages. We know that there are causal factors in a person’s life that can contribute to the start or delay of sexual activity. Parents’ divorce, drug and alcohol abuse, sexual abuse, and peer pressure are among the factors that contribute to the start or delay of sexual activity. When a mass of people are all living in the same conditions, they are subject to a lot of the same factors, so the culture as a whole tends to mature similarly.

In the ghetto in “Random Family”, the teen-ager as a mature sexual being is clearly the norm. Once, Coco and Cesar stayed in a hotel room in the Poconos and “made love” all day. LeBlanc writes, “That weekend in the Poconos was the only honeymoon Coco and Cesar would ever have, although they would remain in love for many years. They were both fourteen.” (69)

Although young teen pregnancies happen in suburban culture, teenagers having babies is the norm in the ghetto. Jessica and her friend, Lillian, both had casual sex with older boys in the same room when they were sixteen. They both came out pregnant. Lourdes, Jessica’s mother, had her first child when she was sixteen. Coco started having children as a teenager. Jessica’s daughter, Serena, also got pregnant at sixteen.

There are very few mentions of condom usage throughout the novel and it is only when Coco moves out of the Bronx to try to better herself does she take measures to prevent further pregnancies.

Although there are a great many cultural variations that set inner city culture apart from suburban culture, one of the defining characteristics of the culture as a whole, is the sexual experience of the individuals within that culture. The major differences in the sexual experience and identities of the women in *Random Family*, create one of the key components that clearly differentiate the two cultures.