Speaker 1 (00:04):
In our podcast, we're going to talk about heteronormativity, respectability politics, and queer identity across historical time periods. Drawing on the article, Intersectionality, Heteronormativity, and Black Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Families. The authors define heteronormativity as a concept that centers patriarchy and heterosexuality as a social norm. And defines all under other genders, sexualities, and sexual expressions as deviant. Heteronormativity is theorized as constitutive of race, class, gender, and sexuality, it is also positioned to centralize specific white, or specific racialized and classed bodies through a hetero patriarchal normalizing ideology. The authors define an image of heteronormativity. In America, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure. It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within this society. The establishment of heteronormativity and the othering of certain races both emerge out of colonial nation building. Heteronormativity was associated with whiteness causing racism and queer phobia to develop together.

Speaker 2 (01:22):
So first we will discuss how gender and as a result, respectability acts as colonizing 'civilizing' forces. In his review of the book, The Sexual Demon of Colonial Power Pan African Embodiment and Erotic Schemes of Empire, Alok Menon writes that the need to challenge gender and sex categories begins with decolonization and accounting for the legacy of chattel slavery. Modern gender and sex categories are not natural. They were created specifically in the context of Western Empire as a way to naturalize slavery and colonialism. Gender isn't just a social construct, it's culturally specific, was a western bourgeois social construct.

Menon summarizes how historically Black people were always rendered outside of gender and sex categories. The definitions of man and woman were formalized and codified into law and science in the context of race, empire and anti-black racism. For Dr. Greg Thomas, the author, there is no universal man socialized in opposition to the universal woman. There is a white man and a white woman specified over and against Black Africans. Menon rights that western gender categories were developed as a metric to demonize Black people and "Civilized white people". Excluding black people from the gender system was central to the dehumanization of Black people and the justification of their captivity. More specifically, the exploitation of slavery created the material conditions of leisure and domesticity necessary for white womanhood. Black people were not permitted domesticity, they were all expected to work. Benjamin Kahan notes this explicitly in his article, Sheiks Sweet Backs and Harlem Renaissance Sexuality or the Chauncey thesis at 25.

He writes that Black sexuality during and after slavery must be understood as ungendered in both their actual mutilation and dismemberment, making them unrecognizable as gendered subjects. As well as more metaphorically in the severance of body from active desire and will. Alec Menon further articulates how gender constructions are connected to imperialism or the intersection of the acquisition of capital and the cultural frameworks that enable it.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, the sex binary was defined as a civilizational accomplishment, exclusive to the white race. Introducing Black and indigenous people to the western sex binary was part of the white man's burden, the so-called obligation to bring "Civilization" to the "Savage races across the world." Colonists sought to annihilate Black and indigenous practices of kinship and embodiment and
impose new genders and sexualities molded in the image of the colonial mother and family. Kahan later touches on how in the aftermath of slavery, Black sexual culture developed its own system of gendering, less tightly bound to the polls of male and female.

(04:14):
In the next section, we’ll talk about how these frameworks apply to later historical periods like the Harlem Renaissance. So the Harlem Renaissance came on the cusp of World War I and the great migration in which Black workers moved in droves to the north and had access to better jobs than in the South. Also called the New Negro Movement, it called attention to how, as the textbook writes, the freedom struggle would necessarily be cultural as well as economic, political, and social. And precisely because these aspects of the freedom struggle were at once separable and inextricably woven. In its own way, the Harlem Renaissance was a break from the respectability politics of Anglo America. It celebrated blackness and the cultural creation around Black beauty. It was this break in respectability that allowed queer identities to proliferate as shown in a quote about how "The Harlem Renaissance was truly as gay as it was Black, not that it was exclusively either of these." However, perhaps it was the lack of pressure from white society to appeal to gender norms that helped Harlem's queer expressions to proliferate.

(05:19):
In the book Bulldaggers, Pansies and Chocolate Babies, the ghetto provides protection for its inhabitants. That is an African American would be less likely to encounter police harassment and racially incited violence in a predominantly Black neighborhood. It was the respectability movements of the later 19 hundreds that sought to define a gender binary in order to adhere to the colonial metrics of humanization. Later in the SNCC Denim article, SNCC activists sought to break this binary again. Their humanity would not be defined by respectability politics or the imperialist metrics to measure someone's worth. They would wear the skin of the working class and gender neutral pants or overalls, rather than straightened, treated hair and skirts. Methods used by previous nonviolent movements to prove their humanity in comparison to the inhumanity of white supremacy.

Speaker 3 (06:16):
Moving now towards the modern day, Darren Hutchinson in his 1999 article, Ignoring the Sexualization of Race, Heteronormativity, Critical Race Theory and Anti-racist Politics, brings these concepts of heteronormativity and respectability politics into a more modern context. Hutchinson writes that, "Perhaps the most frequent manifestation of heteronormativity and subordination of gays and lesbians within anti-racist discourse occurs in attempts by people of color, primarily Black heterosexual males, to critique comparisons of racism to homophobia or Black experience to gay experience. Evidently, the respectability politics of the two movements remains a considerable influence into the present day, as individualist explanations of racial and sexual inequality and the resulting desire to keep them separate plague efforts to bring these movements toward a common goal of dismantling heteronormativity."
Despite this, Hutchinson also briefly writes about the specific example of the fight for queer rights in the army and how comparisons to the history of Black rights in the Army have been helpful in progressing this particular branch of the movement.

(07:16):
Even more recently than Hutchinson, Thaddeus Russell's The Color of Discipline, briefly touches on modern respectability politics and the relationship between the queer and civil rights movements, which as we've outlined have been so entangled in their histories. Russell notes that some scholars argue that the queer and civil rights movements are very much related, as they both "Revolve around a single,
simple and yet deeply elusive idea. Integration." Members within the groups have said otherwise, denouncing attempts to draw comparisons between the two movements. (07:47):

Russell draws on the specific example of a group of clergy in New Orleans who actively fought analogies between the movements. This is most likely a direct result of the pressure to conform to heteronormativity in order to achieve progress. As Russell later writes, "Leaders of the African American and gay and lesbian civil rights movements have insisted that non heteronormative behaviors such as sexual promiscuity, the celebration of the self, the embrace of pleasure, and the avoidance of obligation, behaviors historically associated with both African Americans and homosexuals, will block the path to citizenship." And finally, in just the past few years, there have been multiple significant protests in which civil rights and pride movements have come together to support one another. This support however, is distinct from drawing direct comparisons between the two or incorporating one’s purpose into the other. And as such, respectability politics remain present as the movements strive to be distinct in their actions and goals. Though we have seen a significant shift towards solidarity between the movements.