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NAVIGATING INTERRACIAL BORDERS: BLACK-WHITE COUPLES AND THEIR SOCIAL WORLDS

Erica Chito Childs

The 1967 Academy Award-winning movie *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* concluded with a warning from a white father to his daughter and her "Negro" fiancé. That same year, the Supreme Court overturned any laws against interracial marriage as unconstitutional. Yet how does the contemporary U.S. racial landscape compare? In this ever-changing world of race and color, where do black-white couples fit, and has this unimaginable opposition disappeared?

While significant changes have occurred in the realm of race relations largely from the civil rights struggle of the 1960s, U.S. society still has racial borders. Most citizens live, work, and socialize with others of the same race—as if living within borders, so to speak—even though there are no longer legal barriers such as separate facilities or laws against intermarriage. Yet if these largely separate racial worlds exist, what social world(s) do black-white couples live in and how do they navigate these racial borders? Even more important, how do white communities and black communities view and respond to black-white couples? In other words, do they navigate the racial borders by enforcing, ignoring, or actively trying to dismantle them? My goal is to explore these issues to better understand the contemporary beliefs and practices surrounding black-white couples. . . . My data comes from varied sources, including

Web sites, black-white couples, Hollywood films, white communities, and black communities. . . .

. . . My own story also brought me to this research. The social world of black-white couples is the world I navigate. From my own experiences, I have seen the ways most whites respond to an interracial relationship. Growing up white, second-generation Portuguese in a predominantly white Rhode Island suburb, race never was an issue, or at least not one I heard about. After moving to Los Angeles during high school and beginning college, I entered into a relationship with an African American man (who I eventually married), never imagining what it would bring. My family did not disown me or hurl racial slurs. Still, in many ways I learned what it meant to be an "interracial couple" and how this was not what my family, community, or countless unknown individuals had scripted for me. Not many whites ever said outright that they were opposed to the relationship, yet their words and actions signaled otherwise.

One of the most telling examples occurred a few years into our relationship. An issue arose when my oldest sister's daughter wanted to attend her prom with an African American schoolmate she was dating. My sister and her husband refused to let him in the house the night of the prom or any other time because, they said, he was "not right" for her. It was clear to everyone, however, that skin color was the problem. To this day, my niece will tell you that her parents would never have accepted her with a black man. Yet my sister and her family never expressed any opposition to my relationship and even seemed supportive, in terms of inviting us over to their house, giving wedding and holiday gifts, and so forth. Although my sister never openly objected to my relationship, she drew the line with her daughter—quite literally enforcing a racial boundary to protect her daughter and family from blackness. For me, this personal story and the countless stories of other interracial couples point to the necessity of examining societal attitudes, beliefs, images, and practices regarding race and, more specifically, black-white relations. Interracial couples—because of their location on the line between white and black—often witness or bring forth racialized responses from both whites and blacks. As with my sister, opposition may exist yet is not visible until a close family member or friend becomes involved or wants to become involved interracially. . . .

INTERRACIAL RELATIONSHIPS AS A MINER'S CANARY

It is these community and societal responses, as well as the images and beliefs produced and reproduced about these unions that provide the framework within which to understand the issue of interracial couplings. Underlying these responses and images is a racial ideology, or, in other words, a dominant discourse, that posits interracial couples and relationships as deviant. Still, the

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significance of these discourses and what exactly they reveal about race in society can be hard to see. For some of us the effects of race are all too clear, while for others race—and the accompanying advantages and disadvantages—remain invisible. As a white woman, it was only through my relationship, and raising my two children, that I came to see how race permeates everything in society. Being white yet now part of a multiracial family, I experienced, heard, and even thought things much differently than before, primarily because whites and blacks responded to me differently than before. I think of the metaphor of the “miner’s canary”—the canaries miners use to alert them to a poisonous atmosphere. In *The Miner’s Canary: Enlisting Race, Resisting Power, Transforming Power*, Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres argue that the experiences of racial minorities, like the miner’s canary, can expose the underlying problems in society that ultimately affect everyone, not just minorities. In many ways, the experiences of black-white couples are a miner’s canary, revealing problems of race that otherwise can remain hidden, especially to whites. The issues surrounding interracial couples—racialized/sexualized stereotypes, perceptions of difference, familial opposition, lack of community acceptance—should not be looked at as individual problems, but rather as a reflection of the larger racial issues that divide the races. Since interracial couples exist on the color-line in society—a “borderland” between white and black—their experiences and the ways communities respond to these relationships can be used as a lens through which we can understand contemporary race relations. . . .

LIFE ON THE BORDER: NARRATIVES OF BLACK-WHITE COUPLES

From 1999 to 2001, I interviewed fifteen black-white heterosexual couples who were referred to me through personal and professional contacts, and some of whom I encountered randomly in public. They ranged in age from twenty to sixty-nine and all were in committed relationships of two to twenty-five years. Nine were married. The couples’ education levels varied. All respondents had finished high school or its equivalent; twenty-one respondents had attended some college and/or had received a bachelor’s degree; and four respondents had advanced degrees. The socioeconomic status of the couples ranged from working class to upper middle class. The respondents included a college student, waitress, manager, factory worker, university professor, social worker, salesperson, and postal worker. All couples lived in the northeastern United States, from Maine to Pennsylvania, yet many of the couples had traveled extensively and had lived in other parts of the country, including California, Florida, and the South.

I interviewed the couples together, since I was interested in their experiences, accounts, narratives, and the ways they construct their lives and create

their "selves" and their identities as "interracial couples." The interviews lasted for two to three hours, and I ended up with more than forty hours of interview data. . . . These accounts are seen not only as "descriptions, opinions, images, or attitudes about race relations but also as 'systems of knowledge' and 'systems of values' in their own right, used for the discovery and organization of reality."

THE SEPARATE WORLDS OF WHITES AND BLACKS

To explore the larger cultural and sociopolitical meanings that black-white couplings have for both the white and black communities in which they occur, a significant portion of this work is based on original qualitative research in white communities and black communities about their ideas, beliefs, and views on interracial sexuality and marriage. Community research was conducted to further explore the responses to interracial couples that are found in social groups and communities—family, friends, neighbors, religious groups, schools, etc. The ways that these couples provide the occasion for groups to express and play out their ideas and prejudices about race and sex are integral to understanding the social construction of interracial couples. . . .

A black person and a white person coming together has been given many names—miscegenation, amalgamation, race mixing, and jungle fever—conjuring up multiple images of sex, race, and taboo. Black-white relationships and marriages have long been viewed as a sign of improving race relations and assimilation, yet these unions have also been met with opposition from both white and black communities. Overall, there is an inherent assumption that interracial couples are somehow different from same-race couples. Within the United States, the responses to black-white couplings have ranged from disgust to curiosity to endorsement, with the couples being portrayed as many things—among them, deviant, unnatural, pathological, exotic, but always sexual. Even the way that couples are labeled or defined as "interracial" tells us something about societal expectations. We name what is different. For example, a male couple is more likely to be called a "gay couple" than a gender-mixed couple is to be called a "heterosexual couple."

Encompassed by the history of race relations and existing interracial images, how do black-white couples view themselves, their relationships, and the responses of their families and communities? And how do they interpret these familial and community responses? Black-white couples, like all of us, make meaning out of their experiences in the available interpretive frameworks and often inescapable rules of race relations in this country. . . .

Black-white couples come together across the boundaries of race and perceived racial difference seemingly against the opposition of their communities. This is not to say, however, that the couples are free from racialized thinking, whether it be in their use of color-blind discourse or their own

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racial preferences, such as to date only interracially or to live in all-white neighborhoods. Nonetheless, these couples create multiracial families, not only creating multiracial families of their own but also changing the racial dynamic of the families from which they come. What significance does this have for the institution of family, and how does this play out for the white and black families to whom it occurs?

It might be expected that the family is the source of the greatest hostility toward interracial relationships. It is in families that the meanings and attachments to racial categories are constructed and learned; one's family is often "the most critical site for the generation and reproduction of racial formations." This includes who is and is not an acceptable marriage partner. In white and black families, certain discourses are used when discussing black-white relationships that reproduce the image of these unions as different, deviant, even dangerous. Interracial relationships and marriage often bring forth certain racialized attitudes and beliefs about family and identity that otherwise may have remained hidden. The ways that white and black families understand and respond to black-white interracial couples and the racialized discourses they use are inextricably tied to ideas of family, community, and identity. White and black families' (and communities') interpretations and responses to interracial couples are part of these available discourses on race and race relations in our society. Many times, black-white couples provide the occasion for families to express and play out their ideas and prejudices about race and sex, which is integral to understanding the social construction of "interracial couples" within America today.

ALL IN THE FAMILY: WHITE FAMILIES

Among whites, the issue of interracial marriage is often a controversial topic, and even more so when they are asked to discuss their own views of their family's views. The white community respondents in this study were hesitant to discuss their personal views on family members becoming involved interracially. One strategy used by the respondents was to discuss other families they knew rather than their own views. For example, during the white focus group interviews, the first responses came from two individuals who had some experience or knowledge of interracial couples or families. Sara discussed a friend who adopted two "very dark" black children and how white people would stare at her and the children in public. Anne mentioned her niece who married a black man and said "the family is definitely against it," which causes them problems.

In group interviews with white college students, a number of the students also used stories about other interracial families they knew to explain why their family would prefer they marry someone of the same race. One college student said her family would have a problem with her marrying interracially,

explaining that their opinion is based on their experiences with an interracial family in their neighborhood. She had babysat for this family and, according to her, they had "social issues because the dad was *real dark* and the mom was white, and the kids just had major issues." Her choice of words reveals the importance of color and the use of a discursive strategy such as referring to the children as a problem and not the relationship itself. . . .

White "Concern" and Preference

For the white college students interviewed, the role of family is key and certainly influences their decisions not to date interracially. The majority of white students expressed verbally or by raising their hand that their parents, white parents in general, would have a difficult time with an interracial partner for a number of reasons. Yet their parents' opposition was described in nonracial terms, much like their own views. For example, one white male student said, "All parents find something wrong [with the person their child chooses] if they're not exactly as they imagined. My parents would be *surprised* because [an interracial relationship] is not what they are expecting, so it would be difficult in that sense." Many students simply stated something to the effect of "my parents aren't prejudiced; they just wouldn't want me to marry a black guy."

Other students described their families' views against interracial dating as based on the meanings of family and marriage in general. For example, one male student stated that his parents would have a problem with an interracial relationship, because "they brought me up to date within [my] race. They're not like racist, but [they say] just keep with your own culture, be proud of who you are and carry that on to your kids." Some students cited the difference between dating and marriage. As one female college student said, "It becomes more of an issue when you get to be juniors or seniors, because you start thinking long-term, about what your parents will say, and dating a black person just isn't an option." Another student described dating interracially in similar terms: "Dating's not an issue, they always encouraged [me] to interact with all people. For the future and who you're gonna spend the rest of your life with, there's a difference between being with someone of the same race and someone of a different race, [interracial marriage] is not like it's wrong but . . . just that it would be too difficult."

In one of the discussions of family with the white college students, an interesting incident occurred. One of the male students, who was vocal throughout the focus group, sat listening to the other students and looking around the room. Finally he interrupted the discussion: "Are you kidding me? . . . parents would shit, they'd have a freaking heart attack. [*He dramatically grabs the front of his shirt and imitates a growling father's voice*]. "Uhh, son, how could you do this to us, the family?" Everyone laughed at his performance, but this student's use of humor to depict his father (or a white father in

general) having "a heart attack" he presented it in a comic way to the group. Often, jocular humor is used to avoid being labeled racist.

When asked why their parents' opposition to an interracial relationship, the group identified the family as the reason why they are not dating. The family as the reason why they are not dating was described as the family not become involved. The parents were described as '

IT'S A FAMILY AFFAIR

Black families, like white families, are not immune to racial issues. A family member may be seen as problematic on a number of different issues than the white family. "It's a family affair" and the negative implications of dating interracially. These issues figured prominently in the responses of community respondents, as well.

Among the black college students interviewed, the issue was the emphasis on family as the issue, unlike the white students whose parents would have a problem with an interracial relationship. Their parents would outright disapprove of the relationship (from the group). Another student described a family member's comment: "My black woman, and they instilled in me not to date with anyone but a strong black woman. Comments they had heard from their parents. Similarly, Leslie, a black student, was brought up by her parents to date any black person. She added that her parents were not dating interracially." Allen also stated that dating is fine but not marriage. Chris and Victoria, and other students had more difficulty accepting an interracial couple was getting married.

A significant piece of the discussion was the racism of whites in the large group. A student had a hard time accepting a father's opposition because of lingering racism. One black college student brought home a white ma-

general) having "a heart attack" is an interesting discursive strategy. Although he presented it in a comical way, his statement does not seem unrealistic to the group. Often, jocular speech is used to convey a serious message in order to avoid being labeled racist or prejudiced.

When asked why their families would respond in these ways to an interracial relationship, the group largely cited the "opposition of the larger society" as the reason why they and/or their family personally would prefer that their family not become involved interracially. Among the white college students, parents were described as "concerned about how difficult it would be." . . .

IT'S A FAMILY AFFAIR: BLACK FAMILIES

Black families, like white families, can operate as a deterrent to interracial relationships. A family member becoming involved with a white individual is seen as problematic on a number of levels, yet the black families often raised different issues than the white families, such as the importance of "marrying black" and the negative meanings attached to becoming involved interracially. These issues figured prominently among the black partners, the black community respondents, and even black popular culture.

Among the black college students and community respondents, a main issue was the emphasis on marrying within their race, explicitly identifying race as the issue, unlike the white communities. Most students discussed how their parents would have a problem. One black female student stated, "My family would outright disown me" (which received a number of affirmations from the group). Another college student commented on the beliefs her family instilled in her: "My family raised me to be very proud of who I am, a black woman, and they instilled in me the belief that I would never want to be with anyone but a strong black man." Other students described incidents or comments they had heard that let them know they were expected to marry black. Similarly, Leslie, a black community respondent, stated she was raised by her parents to date anyone, but they were "adamant about me marrying black." She added that they told her not to "even think about marrying interracially." Allen also stated that his parents told him that "high school dating is fine but not marriage, ohhh nooo!" Couples like Gwen and Bill, Chris and Victoria, and others also recounted how the black partner's family had more difficulty accepting the relationship when they realized that the couple was getting married as opposed to just dating.

A significant piece of black familial opposition involves the perceived racism of whites in the larger society. Black families were described as having a hard time accepting a family member getting involved with a white person because of lingering racism and a distrust in whites in general. For example, one black college student stated that her family would have a problem if she brought home a white man, "because they would always be wondering what

his family was saying, you know, do they talk about me behind my back?" Other students' responses echoed these views, such as one student who remarked, "My mom would have a problem with it. She just doesn't trust white people."

Also, black community members such as Alice and Jean argued that their opposition to a family member getting involved with a white person was based on the belief that the white individual (or their white family/neighborhood) would mistreat their family member. All but two of the black community members expressed the concern that since white society is racist there is no reason to become involved with a white person. . . .

The black families related to this study objected to having a white person in their family and intimate social circles because they viewed whites as the "enemy" and their presence as a sign that the black partner is not committed to his or her community or family. Not surprisingly, black individuals opposed interracial marriage much more than interracial dating, primarily because marriage represents a legitimization of the union and formally brings the white partner into the family.

Despite such opposition, the black college students argued that black families are still more accepting than white families. . . .

While white families discourage their family members from engaging in interracial relationships to maintain white privilege, black families discourage these unions to maintain the strength and solidarity of black communities. Black families view interracial relationships as a loss in many ways—the loss of individuals to white society, the weakening of families and communities, and the devaluing of blackness. . . .

FAMILY MATTERS

. . . The familial responses discussed throughout the research clearly demonstrate how images of oneself and one's family is linked to the concept of race and otherness, especially within the construction of families, both white and black. White families often objected to the idea of a member dating interracially, not because they met the black individual and were confronted with overwhelming "racial" differences, but because they were merely responding based on their ideas and beliefs about interracial relationships and blacks in general. . . .

Being in an interracial relationship often brings forth problems within families, since white and black families overwhelmingly want to remain monoracial. . . .

This . . . highlights how difficult it is to negotiate issues of race and family. Discussing race and, more important, views on interracial relationships in nonracial terms often makes it even more difficult for individuals to challenge and confront their family's views. By using phrases such as "It's not my

personal preference" or "it's just my family's personal preference," families and individuals avoid appearing prejudiced, but this avoidance is also tied to the issue of respectability politics involved. Families of color, especially children who will be productively engaged with white families to worry that their children will be perceived as "not black enough" and their fears and beliefs demonstrate how race, family, and identities are intertwined by racial boundaries. Children are often forced to exist somewhere



STRAIGHT IS TO

Kath Weston

IS "STRAIGHT" TO AS "FAMILY" IS TO

For years, and in an era when gay identity has been portrayed as a threat to family from kinship. In media discourse, "we are invited to imagine 'gay life' and 'the family' as if we lived our lives in total isolation. . . . To lend a dubious credence to the idea that we do not have children or that we invariably alienate adop-

From Kath Weston, *Families* (New York: Routledge Press, 1991), pp. 22–29. Reprinted with permission.

personal preference” or “I just worry about the problems you will face in society,” families and individuals are able to oppose interracial relationships without appearing prejudiced or racist. A family member’s opposition, however, is also tied to the issue of identity—the identity of the family and the individuals involved. Families express concern over the identities of the biracial children who will be produced, and in many ways there is a tendency for white families to worry that the children will be “too black,” and the black families worry about the children being “more white.” The white individuals who enter into a relationship with a black person are seen as “less white” and as tainting the white family, while the black individuals who get involved are seen as “not black enough” and as leaving their blackness behind. All of these fears and beliefs demonstrate the centrality of race to the constructions of families and identities and, more important, the socially constructed nature of race, if one’s relationship can change one’s “race” in this society still divided by racial boundaries. Ultimately, black-white couples and biracial children are forced to exist somewhere in between, with or without their families.

STRAIGHT IS TO GAY AS FAMILY IS TO NO FAMILY

Kath Weston

IS “STRAIGHT” TO “GAY” AS “FAMILY” IS TO “NO FAMILY”?

For years, and in an amazing variety of contexts, claiming a lesbian or gay identity has been portrayed as a rejection of “the family” and a departure from kinship. In media portrayals of AIDS, Simon Watney . . . observes that “we are invited to imagine some absolute divide between the two domains of ‘gay life’ and ‘the family,’ as if gay men grew up, were educated, worked and lived our lives in total isolation from the rest of society.” Two presuppositions lend a dubious credence to such imagery: the belief that gay men and lesbians do not have children or establish lasting relationships, and the belief that they invariably alienate adoptive and blood kin once their sexual identities become