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# Beyond "Code-switching:" The Racial Capital of Black/White Biracial Americans

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# Beyond “Code-switching:” The Racial Capital of Black/White Biracial Americans

Chandra D. L. Waring, PhD

University of Connecticut, 2013\*

Social science has examined the experiences of the burgeoning bi/multiracial population within the scope of three core areas: racial identity (Funderburg 1994; Kilson 2001; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2008; Renn 2004; Root 1996), social psychological well-being (Bracey et al. 2004; Campbell and Eggerling-Boek 2006; Cheng and Lively 2010; Binning et al. 2009) and family racial socialization (DaCosta 2007; Dalmage 2000; Samuels 2009; Socha and Diggs 1999; Twine 2010). In my dissertation, I shift the theoretical focus from identity and well-being to the conceptual development of how race—embedded with assumptions, understandings and histories—shapes bi/multiracial Americans’ everyday social interactions with white and black Americans. Through 60 in-depth, semi-structured, life story interviews, I found that the majority of my participants reported interacting differently during encounters with whites and blacks or when in predominately white settings versus predominately black settings as a means to establish racial in-group membership. In an effort to analyze these interactional patterns, I offer the concept of “racial capital” to call attention to the repertoire of racial resources (i.e. knowledge, experiences, meaning and language) that biracial Americans draw upon to negotiate racial boundaries in a highly racialized society. While past research on bi/multiracials has created conceptual frameworks for racial identity trends as well as social psychological development, these studies have not systematically considered how everyday interactions unfold, and how bi/multiracials draw upon a unique racialized “tool kit” (Swidler 1986) to work within

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and around racial boundaries. Furthermore, while racism scholars have discussed the negotiation of racial boundaries for other populations that do not neatly fit into racial categories, such as second generation South Asian Americans (Purkayastha 2005), these processes have not been systematically addressed in the bi/multiracial population. Through the narratives of my respondents, I fill this gap in the literature.

\*year of degree completion

Beyond “Code-switching:” The Racial Capital of Black/White Biracial Americans

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B.A., University of Connecticut, 2007

M.A., University of Connecticut, 2009

A Dissertation

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Chandra D. L. Waring

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Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation

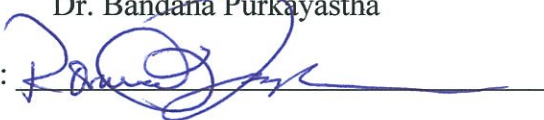
Beyond “Code-switching:” The Racial Capital of Black/White Biracial Americans

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\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.” Without all of these mentors, I would not be the scholar that I am today.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction: Why Study Biracials?

“As it was, I learned to slip back and forth between my black and white worlds, understanding that each possessed its own language and customs and structures of meaning, convinced that with a bit of translation on my part the two worlds would eventually cohere” (Obama 2004: 82).

This dissertation began as a master’s thesis topic on how black/white biracial<sup>1</sup> Americans conceptualize the term race. I was interested in how they come to formulate ideas about race based on their experiences as a biracial individual embedded in a multiracial family unit. I deliberately chose the black/white biracial population in part because of my own black and white background. Having grown up not only in a multiracial family but also on racially and ethnically diverse military installations in Germany and Georgia, I realized at a young age that there was a disjuncture between the way I understood race and the way the majority of my civilian Southern peers understood this concept. Living in a variety of settings that were racially heterogeneous in Germany and Connecticut as well as racially homogeneous areas in Georgia and Washington, D.C. at a Historically Black College, I became fascinated with the concept of race and how people made meaning of it. My interest was grounded within the notoriously contentious four hundred year history of black/white relations in the United States. Because of this distinct history, I decided studying a group that possesses both black and white ancestry is a fitting entry point into examining bi/multiracials. Since the United States Census had recently allowed Americans to choose more than one racial background, I was also able to use terms that now

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<sup>1</sup> As a result of linguistic limitations, I use the term “bi/multiracial” to refer to individuals of African/black and European/white ancestry. The leading research pertaining to this population utilizes three terms “bi/multiracial,” “biracial” and “multiracial” to refer to the same population (Rockquemore and Brunnsma, 2008; Root, 1996; Samuels, 2009; Shih and Sanchez, 2009). I use “biracial” when referring to participants in this study because the overwhelming majority of them identified with this term. I use the term “bi/multiracial” when referring to the greater American community of people who possess at least two racial ancestries, or to refer to the area of study that targets this population. However, I want to make it clear that the purpose of this research is to highlight the lack of adequate racial terminology.

have some level of formal meaning. I wanted to explore how biracial experiences played out in real life and what it means to be biracial on many levels.

The 16 interviews for my master's thesis led to a variety of themes that required further probing in order to understand how biracial Americans not only understand race, but how they learn to navigate highly racialized terrain in the United States. This led to an additional 44 interviews that examined the racialized encounters of biracial women and men who were interviewed during a critical racial juncture in American history: the acclaimed Obama era. Through the narratives of my respondents, I explore the complex, layered realities of having one white parent and one black parent in the United States, a nation with an infamously racist past yet purportedly "post-racial" present. Notably, my participants reject the notion of a "post-racial" America; they extensively detail how race shapes every aspect of their lives from their most mundane daily activities to their most intimate encounters to the most defining moments of their lives. They reflect on their racialized experiences in their childhood, adolescence and adulthood; with their siblings, parents and extended families; with their peers, girlfriends and boyfriends; and in school, in their neighborhoods and work settings. Collectively, these interactions construct their understanding(s) about a concept that has a four hundred year history in the United States, and guides how they contend with this concept as it colors their everyday experiences. Through the voices of my participants, I demonstrate how racial boundaries operate insidiously in a 21<sup>st</sup> century America, over one hundred years after W. E. B. DuBois' renowned assertion that the "problem of the Twentieth Century will be the problem of the color line" (DuBois 1903[2005]:3). In centering the experiences of black/white biracials—considering that they embody both extremes of the racial hierarchy—I illuminate Root's declaration that

contradicts the common idiom that biracials have “one foot in each world” by arguing that, in fact, they have “*both* feet in *both* worlds” (1996: xi).

This research is grounded in critical race and racism studies as an attempt to examine how racial oppression and privilege continue to operate in a post-Civil Rights America, particularly in a population that traces racial ancestry to both racially oppressed and racially privileged racial groups. Despite seismic changes in the social, political and economic American landscape, the U. S. remains a highly “color-conscious” society (Bonilla Silva 2010). Although the bi/multiracial population is often celebrated as “evidence” of racial harmony, my dissertation de-centers the simplistic assumption that an increasingly bi/multiracial America inevitably facilitates the collapse of racial borders and the disintegration of the concept of race. My respondents’ stories reveal that their lived racialized experiences are deeply felt and thus, a more complicated understanding of how race operates in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is needed. My dissertation reaffirms the arguments of critical race and racism scholars, yet it does so in a population that has been largely overlooked in the critical race and racism literature. Much of this literature focuses on the “undeserved enrichment” of white Americans and “unjust impoverishment” of racial minority groups (Feagin 2001:18). Scholars highlights the significance of white privilege over the course of multiple generations (Bush 2011; Delgado and Stefancic 1997; Feagin 2006; Kivel 2002; McIntosh 1986; Rothenburg 2012) as well as the impact of exploitation and unequal opportunities in communities of color (Alexander 2010; Bourgois 1999; Delgado and Stefancic 2012; Feagin 2010; Grande 2009; Takaki 1989). These studies concentrate on monoracial (single-race) groups; my research focuses on bi/multiracials, a rapidly growing demographic in the United States. By exploring the experiences of black/white biracials, I am able to analyze this population on three levels: the distinct dynamic of disrupting the racial binary, embodying

the paradoxical intersection of privilege and oppression, and of being biologically and emotionally connected to two historically segregated groups: whites and blacks.

Moreover, bi/multiracial studies focuses primarily on racial identity (Kilson 2001; Korgen 1999; Renn 2009; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2008) and psychological well-being (Binning et al. 2009; Cheng and Lively 2010; Lusk et al. 2010), each of which characterize pieces of the larger biracial puzzle, but both are limited in the scope of biracial experiences in the United States. For example, racialized experiences that are unrelated to identity and well-being are absent from the dominant stream of existing research, yet are necessary in order for scholars, activists, therapists, etc. to comprehensively grasp what it means to be black *and* white in the United States today. During my dissertation proposal phase, I focused primarily on how race shapes daily encounters (hence, the title, *Beyond 'Code-switching: The Racial Capital of Black/White Biracial Americans*). However, since I have had two more years to mine my data, I took the opportunity to explore more themes in my dissertation. A more fitting title would be *Being Biracial: Exploring the Familial, Interactional and Intimate Experiences of Black/White Biracial Americans* yet due to Graduate School guidelines, my dissertation title had to be consistent with my dissertation proposal title. Nonetheless, I answer the following questions in this dissertation:

- 1) How are family relationships in multiracial families shaped by race, or lack of racial homogeneity? More specifically, how does phenotypic resemblance or lack thereof, characterize kinship bonds between children and parents? How do parents react how family membership is perceived in public? How does phenotypic resemblance or lack thereof, affect sibling/sibling relationships?

2) How are every day, mundane experiences at school, work, with friends and when dating shaped by being black/white biracial? How does being both black and white influence acceptance from the black and white communities? How does it guide experiences when interacting in a predominately white setting vs. predominately black setting? How do daily encounters with whites and blacks unfold?

3) What does it mean to be biracial with one or two immigrant parents, considering these parents have not been racially socialized in the United States? What types of racial messages do immigrant-parent biracials receive from their parents, peers and the media? What role does ethnicity play in being bi/multiracial? How does a salient ethnic identity and strong immigrant ties influence the ability to navigate peer groups?

4) How does racial ambiguity affect the intimate lives of bi/multiracials? How are their bodies racially categorized by romantic pursuers? How do they know how their intimate partners categorize them? How does their racially mixed background influence or interact, if at all, with their racially ambiguous body in romantic experiences? What are the dating and romantic preferences and patterns of biracials? What social and structural factors shape these preferences and patterns?

To contextualize the historical significance of the burgeoning bi/multiracial population, I begin this dissertation by highlighting the role of racist ideology, the ensuing racial binary and how both directly shape the unequal structural positioning of African-descent (black) Americans and European-descent (white) Americans. I then outline the institutional arrangements that served to maintain clear-cut racial boundaries for hundreds of years. This was primarily achieved through overt racial segregation and subsequent institutional investments in preventing and penalizing interracial contact, which had the potential to lead to interracial sexual unions.

Throughout the introduction (and at length in chapter three), I draw parallels between anti-interracial sentiment and fears of a racially heterogeneous and/or—more specifically, perhaps—a racially ambiguous population that would ultimately compromise racial boundaries and jeopardize the racial hierarchy. I end the introduction chapter with an outline of my chapters and findings.

*The Birth of Race, Racist Ideology and the Racial Binary*

Political scientist Bruce Baum argues that “the ‘race’ concept has been employed historically to establish hierarchies of ‘humanness’” (2006: 19). It is imperative to note, though, that the idea of race is a relatively modern concept; it was invented in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century to early 18<sup>th</sup> century (Smedley 2007). Omi and Winant define race as “a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to which different types of human bodies” (1994:55). Our current understanding of race, the notion of phenotypic difference infused with social meanings, did not exist before racialized chattel slavery in the United States (Wilson, C. 1996). Prior to the “peculiar institution” of slavery, variations in skin tone, hair texture, eye lid form and other racialized physical features were noticed, but were void of assumptions about intellectual, moral or physical aptitude (Smedley 2007). In fact, the most salient social identity in pre-racial America was religion; “heathens” were discriminated against, not darker-skinned peoples (Smedley 2007). During this time period, Africans were treated as other servants; they were allowed to become free and could own land and businesses (Feagin 2001; Smedley 2007). The lack of racial animus is evident in interracial marriage rates: approximately 50% of free black men married white women (Smedley 2007). This may be attributed to the fact that Africans were considered superior farmers when compared to their non-African counterparts due to their “extensive knowledge base of agriculture and tropical crops”



(Smedley 2007:106).

Racist ideology emerged as a result of a series of social conditions that were primarily economically-motivated (Wilson, C. 1996). White plantation owners specifically targeted African labor only after indentured servitude became inconvenient<sup>2</sup> and after attempts to enslave the Irish, indigenous populations and impoverished English immigrants failed (Smedley 2007). In addition, several thousand black and white<sup>3</sup> servants mobilized against the wealthy planter class during Bacon's Rebellion of 1676 to demand freedom from chattel servitude (Wilson, C. 1996). This rebellion threatened the social order and the existing power structure. Consequently, it was in the best economic interest for the wealthy planter class to establish a social category that trumped the class-based identity among exploited laborers. Race became that identity.

Thus, racist ideology served to justify the exploitation of the free labor and inhumane treatment of Africans and African Americans by developing an ideology that deemed Africans and their descendants sub-human and therefore, closer to the animal kingdom (Baum 2006; Weeks 1986). Consequently, white elites felt entitled, as *fully* human, to enslave these less than human peoples. Furthermore, racist ideology did not threaten the dominant group's religion because principles of Christianity, such as equality and brotherhood, were contingent upon being human, not subhuman. Slavery evolved from temporary to permanent due to a confluence of factors: the need for more labor, more Africans being traded, plantation owners buying slaves instead of servants, and legislation that instituted permanent slavery that extended to the descendants of slaves (Smedley 2007).

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<sup>2</sup> Upon completing their term, indentured servants were reported to be "unruly" (Smedley 2007).

<sup>3</sup> This rebellion was before the ideological construction of race; therefore, blacks and whites were collectively rebelling with no concept of a cross-racial alliance, however they demonstrated an investment in class consciousness.

Racist ideology adheres to a false racial dichotomy of “white” and “non-white,” (which is often coded as “black”). Critical race and racism scholars have argued that when this false binary logic is applied to human beings, “white” becomes synonymous with intelligent, virtue (Wilson 1996), civilized, sexually controlled (Feagin 2006), and superior, whereas “black” symbolizes unintelligent, lazy, savage-like, hypersexual (Collins 2005) and inferior (Wilson 1996). The terms “white” and “black” have become laden with potent opposing messages that serve to maintain the racial binary system. According to post-colonial theory, binaries by definition are composed of words that symbolize signs that are based on having “meaning not by a simple reference to real objects, but by their *opposition* to other signs” (italics mine, Ashcroft, et al. 2000:23). In essence, the purpose of a binary is for the two words to mean the absolute opposite of each other. Common examples of binaries are good/evil, man/woman, modern/traditional, first/third world, and birth/death, each of which plays a significant role in constructing and maintaining our reality (Ashcroft, et al. 2000; Bulbeck 1998). However, the white/black dichotomy is “perhaps one of the most catastrophic binary systems perpetuated by imperialism...that reflects its own logic of power” (Ashcroft, et al. 2000:26). As a result of this racial hierarchy, we see sharp disparities in opportunities and resources that determine the quality of life among black and white Americans in the United States.

#### *Racial Segregation: Historically and Currently*

Baum asserts that “...the ‘race’ concept denotes clear boundaries between groups in relation to discrete ‘complexes of characters’...” (2006:179). The well-documented presence and prominence of racism in the U. S. is the result of four centuries of unequal institutional arrangements that have prohibited interracial contact (especially sexual contact) in all spheres of society as a means to secure distinct racial boundaries. An abbreviated timeline of violent

institutionally-mandated racial segregation follows: the institution of slavery, often characterized by scholars as the worst form of slavery in human history (Feagin 2001), “separate but equal” educational segregation (Johnson 2003); marital segregation in the form of anti-miscegenation laws (Lopez 2006); mass incarceration (Alexander 2010), employment/occupation (Wilson, J. 1996), medical care (Feagin 2001), life expectancy (Baum 2006), image portrayal (Collins 2000), human rights (Feagin 2001), civil liberties (Lopez 2001) sexual segregation reinforced by mass lynchings (Collins 2005); emotional (Beeman 2007), social (Hall 2000), sexual (Bogle 1994) and symbolic (Chito Childs 2009) segregation represented in media portrayals of interracial relations; residential segregation (Massey and Denton 1993) and absolute political *dominance* by white Southerners after the temporarily progressive political gains of a “biracial state government” that the Reconstruction Era created (Feagin 2001:58).

It is important to consider the length of enslavement and segregation compared to the length of freedom and de-segregation to fully comprehend the relatively recent concept of racial “equality” in the timeline of American history. Africans and their African American descendants were enslaved and segregated for longer than they have been free and de-segregated (West 1999). Slavery was legally abolished in 1865 after 225 years of slavery, making Africans “legally” free for 148 years as of 2013. However, Jim Crow segregation ensued from 1887 until the Civil Rights Movement, which ended in 1968, resulting in a total of only 45 years of freedom and equality in a post-Civil Rights America. Therefore, African-descent Americans have only had access to the same citizenship rights (i.e. voting, education, etc.) as their European-descent counterparts for less than five decades. This relatively brief access to freedom in the full legal sense has shaped the present and the future. Feagin contends that “...in one way or another, the majority of whites benefited from the slavery-centered complex...” including not only

slaveholders but merchants, bankers, shippers and farmers (2006:13). Consequently, systematic, generational disadvantages in the black community have structurally positioned African Americans in today's society at a disproportionately unequal starting point in comparison to their white peers in terms of education, health care, family net worth, professional networks and other resources that impact life chances in American society. Hence, education, family, the mass media, the economy and the state have contributed to upholding racial segregation either overtly or covertly. The collective institutional resources were intended to preclude interracial contact and to frame interracial intimacy as abnormal, deviant and in many cases, taboo (Weeks 1986). As a result of this level of racial segregation, the black/white biracial population is a unique and ideal starting place for exploring racial boundaries in a post-slavery and post-Civil Rights era, especially considering the election and re-election of the nation's first black president, President Barack Obama, who possess black and white ancestry.

#### *Dissertation Design: Chapter Outline*

In chapter two, I outline pertinent methodological considerations of my dissertation. I explain my chosen research method, sample selection, data collection, reflexivity, coding and analysis and the inevitable limitations of my study. In chapter three, through previous literature, I examine the history and significance of interracial sexuality as an American taboo. The long legacy of policing interracial contact, especially interracial sexual liaisons, serves as a fertile backdrop to understanding the significance, experiences and implications of a growing bi/multiracial community. Interracial sexuality taboos are still present today, and they occupy a specific racialized and gendered location in the social, political, and economic hierarchy of power. These taboos play a role that is inextricable from maintaining racial boundaries which

would prevent the existence—and certainly the proliferation—of a population that eludes racial boundaries: the bi/multiracial population.

Chapters four, five, six and seven discuss my findings. Existing studies show that bi/multiracial families are still constructed as outside of the norm in the United States, but no studies to my knowledge look at the *impact* of this reality on the family dynamic with regard to family interactions and relationships. In chapter four, I examine how relationships in multiracial families are shaped by racial, or phenotypic, resemblance. Respondents recall how their multiracial family is perceived in public (i.e. at school, in a restaurant, etc.), how their parents contend with these public perceptions (e.g. through validation, explanations, etc.) and how participants characterize their kinship ties based on their physical and racialized features. The common thread throughout this chapter is how ideas about family, resemblance and race are deeply intertwined. Participants' narratives illuminate how family connotes physical resemblance, and resemblance is understood racially, that is, through skin complexion, hair texture and eye color. As a result, the way multiracial family members are viewed in the public domain is different, which shapes how they interact with each other in private and in public, and how those interactions shape their parent/child and sibling/sibling relationships.

Previous studies introduce, support and challenge theories about racial identity and psychological well-being but there has been no conceptual framework that systematically analyzes how biracials interact in everyday encounters with whites and blacks. In chapter five, I attempt to fill this gap by introducing the term “racial capital” to call attention to the repertoire of racial resources that my participants deploy to negotiate racial boundaries in a highly racialized society. These resources are knowledge, experiences, meaning and language, and can be used singularly or collectively. My findings show that participants acquire racial capital through long-

term, meaningful interactions with both racial communities *as an insider* and are used to navigate largely segregated settings in school, at work, within families and when interacting with peers. Not to be confused with racial privilege, racial capital operates as an asset in both racial communities and is dependent upon access to two racial worldviews. In this chapter, I also highlight the disadvantages of racial capital as well as racial capital debacles that demonstrate how racial resources are mediated by a variety of social markers such as class, generation, etc.

There is very little research on bi/multiracials with an immigrant background. Because 17 of my respondents had at least one immigrant parent, I decided to devote one chapter to foreground how their experiences were different from their American parent counterparts. Chapter six highlights the dynamic interplay of race, ethnicity and immigrant ties in the bi/multiracial community. My findings show that respondents struggle to articulate the meaning of race, they assert specific half racial/half ethnic identities to circumvent stereotypical connotations of whites and blacks, and they demarcate the parameters of blackness, whiteness and immigrant status in navigating peer groups. This chapter indicates that biracial Americans with immigrant ties—those who we might assume would have a limited understanding of race—express clear meanings of racial superiority and inferiority, racial relations and racial stereotypes. Emphasizing their ethnic roots is not only an attempt to accurately describe their ancestry; it also precludes them from the social consequences (i.e. stereotypes, discrimination, etc.) of being (half) white or (half) black.

My final chapter of findings delves into dating and the realm of romance. In chapter seven, I classify a subset of 22 respondents as “racially ambiguous,” and I explore their intimate pursuits and encounters. This chapter analyzes the distinct, layered intersection of gender, sexuality and race in a population that disrupts racial categories, and therefore transforms how

the categories of gender, sexuality and race interlock. These 22 respondents are coded as “exotic” by romantic pursuers by virtue of both their body and their racial backgrounds, and my findings demonstrate how participants internalize the ideologies that camouflage the term “exotic” as a compliment. Secondly, I underscore how being considered “exotic” influences respondents’ dating preferences and patterns. Lastly, I document the nuanced dynamic of how being characterized as “exotic” shapes sexual excitement, expectations and encounters. Few bi/multiracial studies explore romance, dating and intimacy, fewer employ an intersectional lens, and even less include sexual minorities. This chapter highlights the importance of examining intersectionality in a new way, a way that is not limited to single statuses (e.g. heterosexual black women), but more accurately reflects the complexity of lived experiences (i.e. gay black/white biracial men). By identifying a new level of intersectionality, one that allows for intersecting identities *within one identity*, I contribute to intersectional scholarship. By illustrating the synonymous relationship of racial ambiguity and “exotic,” I document how colorblind ideology penetrates the most intimate aspect of the lives of the largest mixed-race demographic in the U.S.: black/white biracials.

In my conclusion, I summarize my dissertation findings and assert how these findings enhance our understandings of bi/multiracial Americans in the United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I will also document the implications of my findings as they relate to other studies and as they facilitate a new path in bi/multiracial studies. In addition, I will propose suggestions about future research, considering the escalating bi/multiracial population in a country laboring under an uncritical “post-racial” delusion, and the rate at which the concept of race touched the lives of my 60 respondents.

## Chapter 2

### Methodological Considerations

“In my own work I write not only what I want to read—understanding fully and indelibly that if I don't do it no one else is so vitally interested, or capable of doing it to my satisfaction—I write what I *should* have been able to read.”

~Alice Walker

How do you study bi/multiracials? I was interested in seeking out a group that, although growing, was less than 2.5% of the American population, according to the 2000<sup>4</sup> U.S. Census. I was targeting in an even smaller demographic: specifically, black/white biracials. A host of factors shaped by methodological approach. First of all, because there was not a specific place where black/white biracials congregated and because I had no budget, my choices were limited. Also, the type information I was interested in collecting and analyzing influenced my method (Sprague 2005). Influenced by the works of Gloria Gonzalez-Lopez (2005), Eileen O'Brien (2008) and Bandana Purkayastha (2005), all scholars who explored racialized experiences through interviewing, I was drawn to interviewing as a methodological strategy for exploring meanings, processes and experiences, and how they are connected to larger social structures of the past and present. Furthermore, inspired by Oyewumi's (1997) epistemological critiques and assertions of gender, I was interested in creating a new way of conceptualizing and organizing knowledge about bi/multiracials. Therefore, I wanted to ask questions that have not been asked, and re-shape the epistemological reflex in bi/multiracial studies of focusing on identity, which involves assumptions about the process of knowing. Considering that I had access to my target population and that I wanted to initiate new patterns of knowing (about biracials), I decided

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<sup>4</sup> I began collecting data in 2009 before the 2010 Census was conducted; therefore, my frame of reference came from the 2000 Census report.



conducting in-depth interviews would be the best method to explore the experiences of black/white biracials.

I conducted 60 semi-structured life story interviews with women and men who self-identified as having one white parent and one black parent. I am aware that the questions that are asked in a research study form the building blocks of knowledge production (Duster 2000); therefore, I discussed my interview guide with four sociologists, including urban, race/racism and culture scholars with expertise in qualitative methods. The sociological method of interviewing in life story or oral history format elucidates a unique connection between isolated events, reoccurring situations and the individual's retrospective understanding of both. Consequently, employing storytelling as a research tool locates potential variation in understandings based on meanings, memories and identities (Auyero 2002). These life-story interviews explored respondents' parents' dating history, respondents' parents' backgrounds, their family relationships, their racial identity, their childhood, and their experiences at school, work and with dating. Due to the flexibility that a semi-structured interview allows for (Merriam 2009), coupled with the reality of time constraints, some interviews emphasized themes that were not discussed or even applicable in previous or subsequent interviews, such as immigrant background, half-siblings, raising children, etc. These questions followed a chronological strategy that allowed respondents to tell a story about their life (Weiss 1994), and how it was shaped by race, gender and other factors. This form of sociological storytelling "help[s] organize the flow of interaction, binding together or disrupting the relation of self to other and community," (Gonzalez-Lopez 2005:11) which is particularly relevant in a study of interviewees with ties to two racial communities. My interview guide is included in the Appendix.

I adopted this qualitative research strategy as a means to examine a variety of themes that focused on their *experiences* as a biracial person, rather than their identity or well-being, which scores of scholars have investigated. Additionally, because qualitative research examines nuances and interpretations through a systematic analysis of processes and/or meaning-making (Sprague 2005), I was able to outline the processes of how conversations and social interactions about race and gender unfolded. This format was also conducive to probing deeper into respondents' conceptualizations of race, which are much more complicated than a definition, or formal understanding of race, and include a "wider range of thinking" (Morning 2011:10). The sociological method of interviewing in life story format allows for a multi-dimensional understanding of experiences, including how participants understood an event or encounter when it occurred as well as their seasoned interpretation in the present context (Auyero 2002). Therefore, in-depth interviews generate a level of description and reflection about experiences that "seldom occur in everyday life" (Charmaz 2006:25) and are consequently, instrumental in understanding how participants make sense of their realities.

### *Sample*

The age range of interviewees was 18-32 years old; 25 participants are men and 35 are women. The majority of respondents (54 out of 60) have a white mother and a black father. While this outcome presents a limitation, it also reflects the social pattern of black/white interracial unions in the United States, in which white women/black men partnerships dominate their black women/white men counterparts (DaCosta 2004). Twenty-two ethnic backgrounds were represented in this study: African American, Antiguan, Cherokee, Columbian, Cuban, Cape Verdean, Egyptian, English, French Canadian, German, Ghanaian, Jamaican, Jewish, Italian, Irish, Moroccan, Nigerian, Romanian, Scottish, Swedish, Polish and Portuguese. Although

respondents were recruited on the basis of having a white and black parent, during eight interviews, respondents disclosed that the self-identified black parent possessed racially mixed heritage. I included these narratives to further illuminate the complexity of race as well as generational differences in racial self-identification; historically, “black” as a racial category has obscured other racial ancestries. Participants also span the phenotypic spectrum; some reported being perceived as white, black, Latina/o, Asian, American Indian or a combination of racial designations. Some reported being viewed as racially or ethnically ambiguous and some respondents were perceived entirely differently depending on their social context.

Four respondents identified as gay: one woman and three men. Most respondents were born and raised in the Northeastern United States, including Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania and Rhode Island. However, five respondents grew up on the West Coast, one in the Midwest, one in the Southwest, and four in the Southern United States. Additionally, five interviewees grew up in multiple states or countries. The majority of respondents were enrolled in college at some point, which assumes a relatively privileged class background; however, several respondents discussed financial challenges within their family and growing up that parallel lower middle-class, working class and poor backgrounds.

### *Reflexivity*

The integrity of qualitative research is dependent upon reflexivity, acknowledging the role of the researcher in the process of conducting research and ultimately, the researcher’s role in the process of knowledge production (Merriam 2009). I disclosed my black/white biracial background upon recruiting and/or meeting all participants. Having this heritage in common

foregrounded an “insider understanding” (Lofland and Lofland 1995). As Johnson-Bailey (2009) argues, sharing a distinct, marginalized identity can serve as a strong bond or connection that facilitates an honest, safe and powerful dialogue between the researcher and the respondent. Conwill (2007) reiterates the importance of racial insider status that connotes a level of understanding that is likely void of racist assumptions, which is particularly significant when studying racially oppressed groups. This interview dynamic is noteworthy given the history of some research of marginalized populations, which has relied on inaccurate epistemological frameworks that substantiate unequal power relations (Oyewumi 1997). In fact, scholars have documented how previous research on bi/multiracials has been saturated in misunderstandings, assumptions and narrow definitions of race that do not accurately reflect the lived experiences of bi/multiracials (Funderburg 1994; Root 1996). Therefore, I also used DeVault’s feminist approach of using my own experiences as a biracial person—constituting a shared reality with respondents to some degree—to “serve as resources for...listening” (1990: 104). However, I am aware of the limitations that are also associated with “insider” status. Self-identifying “insiders” may be more inclined to code and analyze the data from a positive perspective, which jeopardizes their empirical contributions (Mannay 2010). In addition, interviewees may assume the researcher is personally familiar with a particular experience and therefore, may be less precise in explaining events, feelings and expectations (Woodward 2008). As a means to avoid any potential biases, I sought feedback from my committee on my interview guide and my qualitative professors during my coding process. In addition, a number of friends, colleagues and scholars read my work and provided consistent, critical feedback. Influenced by the work of feminist scholars Gonzalez-Lopez (2005), Hondagneu-Sotelo (2001) and Oyewumi (1997), I am aware that I occupy a simultaneous insider/outsider position because other social categories

situated me as an outsider such as gender, ethnicity, religious affiliation, ability status, education level, socio-economic background and other markers of difference.

### *Data Collection*

Because of the aforementioned limitations in locating black/white biracials, a group that is not easily identifiable, my initial interviews were based on convenience sampling through personal and professional contacts. As the study progressed, I used snowball sampling to recruit additional respondents. Also, friends, colleagues, participants and former students of mine enthusiastically introduced me to their black/white friends, partners, siblings, cousins, co-workers and acquaintances. Additionally, I sent out a call for participants to a local university, which resulted in six interviews. I conducted the interviews between January 2009 and January 2011, and the interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 3 hours. Most of the interviews were conducted in person at a location of the respondents' choice that was determined via email. The majority of my respondents' life stories unfolded in intimate places such as a quiet corner of a coffee shop, respondents' office or home or at restaurant during off-peak hours.

Five interviews were conducted electronically (via email) and two interviews were conducted through a video chat (i.e. Skype). Although these interviewing techniques change the dynamic of collecting data, especially through email, I decided the sample would benefit from regional and experiential diversity. For example, one email interviewee who was from the West Coast was living in Scotland at the time of the interview and due to our schedules and the time difference, we were unable to schedule a phone or Skype interview. The two Skype interviews were conducted with respondents who lived in and were raised in the South. Therefore, these alternative interviewing methods contributed to the diversity of my study.

During the first handful of interviews, I took occasional notes about a respondent's facial expression, tone of voice or hand gestures. However, I noticed that this distracted participants, even if temporarily, so I opted to forego this technique and concentrate more on making mental field notes. For example, in order to not distract my interviewee, I would glance casually at my tape recorder, which was usually on the table or a desk, when a respondent engaged in distinct non-verbal communication and made my best effort to memorize the minute and second they made this remark, gesture or facial expression. I then took copious notes if the interview was interrupted (i.e. if the participant used the restroom or took a phone call) and at the end of the interview. Writing down my observations immediately following the interview allowed me to describe my participants' narratives in greater detail, or thick description (Geertz 1973), and enriched my analytical lens (Merriam 2009). After all, as Glaser (2001: 145) argues, "All is data."

In the process of collecting data and transcribing interviews, I engaged in "member checking" (Merriam 2009) to ensure validity by sharing my preliminary findings with a few of my initial respondents and requesting their opinion about how I interpreted their experiences. I also kept a research journal as I transcribed the interviews where I recorded my reflections, questions, concerns and ideas that emerged during transcribing (Merriam 2009). I used this journal to "...add new pieces to the research puzzle or conjure entire new puzzles..." (Charmaz 2006:14). Since I employed a grounded theory approach, my research journal helped me refine the scope of my study and I learned to probe about particular social processes and interactions that participants recalled.

### *Coding and Analyzing*

I enlisted a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967) to code and analyze my data as a means to allow dominant themes to emerge without the guidance of predetermined theoretical models. I considered this approach appropriate since I was interested in asking questions that had not yet been answered in the existing bi/multiracial literature. This technique involved reading transcriptions, identifying patterns or themes, and organizing these themes into categories (Saldana 2009). I did not use coding software due to lack of financial resources. However, because I conducted and transcribed all of the interviews, I was intensely familiar with my data and I used “PC databasing” as Lofland and Lofland (1995:188) refer to it to “retrieve, recode, refile and enumerate coded items and relate them to one another.” I used a variety of colors, underlining, bolding, and track changes to create codes and categories. As the research progressed, the coding process intensified as I identified new themes, revisited previous transcriptions and reconfigured the categories. In order to enhance my analysis, I created analytical memos about each theme and these memos helped to guide new coding processes (Saldana 2009) and also helped me determine which themes to draw upon for my dissertation since a number of themes emerged throughout my 60 interviews. Additionally, these analytical memos served to help me detect nuances and caveats of themes and helped me determine which themes overlapped. Because my intention was to explore experiences broadly, this coding and analysis approach generated rich data about meanings, processes and interactions, which helps fill in the gaps of bi/multiracial studies.

### *Limitations and Considerations*

As with any study, my dissertation has limitations. Because my interviewees were not drawn from a simple random sample, they are not necessarily representative of the general black/white biracial American population. However, I interviewed a large number of

respondents in order to conduct a study that was as systematic and comprehensive as possible given my resources. Being a qualitative researcher who asks new questions, my aim was to identify themes and provide a deeper level of analysis, not generalizability. Additionally, convenience and snowball sampling have largely limited the study to black/white biracials who grew up in the Northeast and therefore, it is not necessarily generalizable to the black/white biracial population in other regions on the United States. I attempted to minimize this limitation by interviewing as many non-Northeasterners as possible, which in some cases required alternate interviewing arrangements. Notably, convenience and snowball sampling can also present an advantage during data collection because the fact that I knew some participants established a level of rapport that facilitated ease during the interview. Furthermore, the respondents who were referred to me were often referred through a person whom they had a strong intimate connection with such as a close friend, relative or significant other. In this sense, the mutual contact “vouched” for me and consequently, generated a sense of trust. These advantages are evident in interviews where respondents expressed strong emotions such as crying or shared traumatic memories about their childhood.

### *Personal Reflection on the Study*

I borrowed the bold words of Alice Walker in the beginning of this chapter for a reason. While I was extremely happy to come across anything in print about bi/multiracials or mixed folks, I believed that the overwhelming focus on identity was short-sighted. bell hooks articulates such paradoxical feelings in her work, *Teaching to Transgress*:

It is feminist thinking that empowers me to engage in a constructive critique of Freire’s work...and yet there are many other standpoints from which I approach his work that enable me to experience its value, that make it possible for that work to touch me at the very core of my being...I came to Freire thirsty, dying of



thirst (in that way that the colonized, marginalized subject who is still unsure of how to break the hold of the status quo, who longs for change, is needy, is thirsty), and I found in his work (and the work of Malcolm X, Fanon, etc.) a way to quench that thirst. To have work that promotes one's liberation is such a powerful gift that it does not matter so much if the gift is flawed. Think of the work as water that contains some dirt. Because you are thirsty you are not too proud to extract the dirt and be nourished by the water (1994:49-50).

Similar to hooks, I was profoundly grateful to the existing literature that made room for a mixed-race category rather than airbrushing bi/multiracials as black but after a while, I became equally frustrated. Therefore, I set out to design a different type of study that would be able to contribute to the literature in a creative, innovative way. In the process, I not only learned a wealth of information about my respondents' experiences, meanings and interactions, but I learned much more than I could have ever imagined about myself. This is a common realization (or finding) in qualitative research (Merriam 2002). This study was my passion project from the inception of developing my interview questions and with each interview, I became even more invested in my participants' stories and my ultimate goal, which is to write a book. After completing my initial master's interviews, I proceeded to conduct interviews—driving all over the tri-state area—amidst taking seminars and teaching classes partly because the interviews became therapeutic for me. Having the incredible opportunity to meet and interview 60 fellow biracials in two years and bond with many of them, a handful of whom I've become friends with, is a very special experience that I will never forget. On an intimately private note, my interviewees' narratives helped me to make sense of what my role as a qualitative researcher, sociologist and educator has the potential to mean. I feel privileged and honored to be in the position that I am in; and I want to make my participants proud because they believed in my dreams, and helped me to achieve them.

## Chapter 3

### **Made in America: Interracial Sexuality and Bi/multiracial Children**

“...she described the white daughter of a family friend as having children ‘sired’ by a Black man. Implicit in the concept of ‘siring’ is a construction of Black men as *only* sexual. It denudes fathering of any social, familial or nurturing function, and even of pleasure, connoting only sexuality directed toward reproduction” (Frankenburg 1993:80).

Simply put, bi/multiracial children come from interracial sexual liaisons. Therefore, in this chapter, I will document the history and significance of anti-miscegenation sentiment as a means to foreground the experiences of marginalization among bi/multiracial Americans in the chapters to follow. The discrimination that interracial couples and bi/multiracial children have endured both stem from racist ideologies and the endorsement of distinct racial boundaries. Interracial sex is a central American taboo, and it most stringently applies to the intimate relations between white women and black men. Frankenburg’s above quote alludes to this reality and demonstrates how interracial sex taboos are laden with specific racial and gendered arrangements. The strength of this taboo is evident in the collective legal, political, economic and media resources that have been used to prevent and punish (i.e. stigmatize) interracial contact. Interracial interactions were viewed as dangerous because they could eventually lead to interracial intimacy which has the potential to produce offspring that disrupts racial boundaries by virtue of their ancestry and potentially, their phenotype. Consequently, interracial sex was socially constructed as a taboo through every American social institution. Ultimately, bi/multiracial Americans were made in an America that was invested in precluding their existence.

#### *Interracial Sexuality, Ideologies and Intersectionality*

In order to examine the strongest interracial sexual taboo, it is necessary to deconstruct the dialectic relationships between race, gender and sexuality. White womanhood was framed as

“delicate, refined, and chaste” (Roberts 1997:10), “innocent, frail and passive” (Ferber 1998:106), virtuous (Dalmage 2000), ladylike, proper and beautiful (Patton 2006). In other words, white women exhibit an “ideal” womanhood to the degree that American femininity and womanhood still heavily resemble white features (e.g. blonde hair, light-colored eyes and light skin complexion) with little room for a diverse appreciation of beauty (Patton 2006). In stark contrast, black women (and to some extent, all non-white women) are constructed as the polar opposite of white women: hypersexual, manipulative (West 1990), “immoral, careless, domineering and devious” (Roberts 1997:10), assertive and unfeminine (Collins 2000). Essentially, black women are denied their womanhood and femininity in the same manner in which both black women and black men are denied their full humanity.

Ideologies about race were intertwined with notions of morality; white women were “placed on moral pedestals,” while black women were relegated to systematic sexual objectification (Roberts 1997:10). The mythological hypersexuality of black women was often used as justification for sexually assaulting black female slaves because it was viewed as oxymoronic—if not impossible—to rape women who are inherently licentious (Roberts 1997). The racist logic followed that black women were not raped by white men; conversely, they *seduced* white men and thus, white men were in fact the victims of these exotic temptresses (Nagel 2003). According to Nagel, these simultaneously racialized and sexualized notions reflect an ethnosexual cosmology in which “white men, despite their legal, social, political, and economic power, are victims of the sexual potency and seductive treachery of women and nonwhites” (2003:103). This framing is analogous to the constructed hypersexuality of black males; the key difference is that white males, solely because of their location on the race and gender hierarchy, are “seduced”—not raped—by black females.

White males have been socially constructed as superior by virtue of both their race and their gender. This superiority translates to being framed as intelligent, hardworking, civilized (Feagin 2001), virtuous (Wilson 1996), rational and self-controlled (Feagin 2006). Black men, similar to their female counterparts, resemble contradictory traits of white manhood and are considered to be closer to the animal kingdom, and therefore subhuman and/or beast-like. Consequently, African American men are deemed unintelligent, deviant, lazy (Wilson 1996), irrational, hedonistic (Feagin 2006) savage and hypersexual (Collins 2005). It is worth noting that white men are characterized by intellectual and moral capabilities, while black men are limited to physical and sexual capacities, as Frankenburg's quote about "children being 'sired' by a Black man" explicitly supports.

At a fundamental level, the very personhood that is automatically afforded to white men is alien to the cultural messages and images of black men. The racial framing of white men "logically" follows that they are the protectors of white women just as the racist rhetoric of black men renders them dangerous and thus, in need of being controlled by white men. As a result, it is evident that white men's preoccupation with protecting white women exclusively from black men cannot be divorced from the social expectations that are associated with race and gender. Black women, however, are not absent from the equation of white male dominance or control of sexuality; indeed they are also controlled by white men, as black men are, yet they are not afforded the luxury of "protection" that white women are from *any* male predator. The interlocking ideologies about race, gender and sexuality propagate notions of ideal sexuality as racially homogenous. White women and white men are considered virtuous and civilized and hence, they are sexually compatible while their black counterparts are deemed aggressive and deviant, and therefore, are the most sexually congruent. Despite the fact that ideologically,

sexuality is constructed as racially endogamous, the omnipresence of white male dominance creates a fine distinction of when and how intraracial sexual boundaries can be breached.

*Interracial Sexuality: A Threat to Society*

Interracial sex as a taboo is riddled with nuances and is deeply linked to the “peculiar” institution of slavery and the institutional pattern of white male dominance in the United States. White males have historically monopolized power in every American social institution, which enables them to construct certain sex acts between specific groups of people as deviant or taboo because they have the power to police interracial contact and enforce punitive measures. For example, during slavery, white male slave owners engaged in interracial sexual relations with black female slaves (including rape) with no consequences or stigma. In fact, white male slave masters benefited bountifully from this type of interracial sex because it had the potential to produce offspring that would be legally recognized as slaves (Ferber 1998), although they were often considered to have a higher political and social status due to their white parentage (Breen 1976; Hall 2008). Interracial sex, between white male slave owners and black female slaves, however non-consensual, became a lifeline of the institution of slavery after international slave-trading became illegal in the United States in 1808 (Lutz 2004). Therefore, interracial sex between white men and black women historically symbolized white male power and consequently, carries a different contemporary connotation than interracial sex between white women and black men.

Contrarily, white women who gave birth to mixed-race children posed a threat to white male authority because a mixed-race child born to a white woman and black man *circumvents* white patriarchal power whereas a mixed-race child conceived by a black woman and white man

*signifies* white male dominance (Ferber 1998). Therefore, in order to maintain the white power structure, punitive measures were implemented to prevent or stigmatize interracial relationships between white women and black men (Ferber 1998). At the very core of this taboo lies the notorious “black male rapist” myth in which black men were regarded as lascivious beasts who were obsessed with sexually violating white women. According to Jeffrey Weeks, “[a] fear of black male priapism, and the converse exploitation of black women to service their white masters, was integral to slave society in the American South in the nineteenth century and continued to shape black-white relationships well into the twentieth century” (1986: 38). Collins (2005) refers to this controlling image of black manhood as the “buck,” a characterization of black men as wild, strong and violent and most assuredly, in need of being tamed.

Domesticating such “beasts” includes “directing their albeit natural deviant sexuality toward appropriate female partners...their muscles and their penises [were] their most important sites” (Collins 2005:57). Bogle (1994), preceding Collins, terms this cinematic prototype “the brutal black buck,” who are “always big, baadddd [sic] niggers, oversexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh. No greater sin hath any black man” (13). The hypersexualized, brutal, black male image was propelled through multiple means, ranging from organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan to the mass media, including film and literature. In sum, interracial sex between white women and black men was politically, legally and culturally constructed as non-consensual, robbing both parties of human agency in their intimate, emotional endeavors.

### *Interracial Sex as Non-Consensual*

The characterization of interracial sex as non-consensual continued to fuel its status as a taboo. Nagel contends that “[t]he symbolic transformation of black men from emasculated

slaves into vengeful rapists during the decades following the Civil War thus set the tone for black-white sexual politics in the twentieth century” (2003:115). The “black male sexual predator” myth was a systematic form of white intimidation (Wilson 1996) and has been likened to a terrorist strategy used by white Southerners to justify the lynching of thousands of black men due to the substantial political gains of African Americans during the Reconstruction Era (Feagin 2001). Jim Crow segregation legislation emerged in 1887 in Florida and quickly spread throughout the Bible Belt by 1891 (Wilson 1978: 57). These laws mandated segregation in “both public and private institutions and facilities and also the virtual collapse of public education and the systematic exclusion by white laborers of blacks from jobs in the skilled occupational ranks they had held since slavery” (Wilson 1978:59). Lynching emerged as a marker of racial violence at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was used to informally reinforce Jim Crow segregation (Wilson 1978; Wilson 1996). This gruesome ritual was also endorsed as a way to safeguard vulnerable white women from menacing black males (Wilson 1996). Nagel (2003) notes that “[f]ormal legal means, such as Jim Crow that restricted the political, economic, and social rights of free blacks and informal methods of terror, such as the Ku Klux Klan and lynching [and castrations], became the machinery of racial sexual social control” (22, 111). Ferber argues that lynching also served as a tool to “rescue the reputation of white women who chose to associate with black men” (1998:37). Accordingly, lynching became a tactic to uphold white men’s reputation as “protectors” or dominators because white women were perceived as white men’s property. Jim Crow segregation plagued the South for seventy years (West 1999) before it was struck down by the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950’s and 1960’s (Wilson 1978:137-8).

Post-Emancipation called for legal means to control newly-freed black men from accessing white women. The 1910 Mann Act (also known as the “White Slave Traffic Act”) was

implemented to sanction black male/white female contact by charging black men with “engaging in white slavery,” which entailed “transporting women across state lines for prostitution” (Nagel 2003:116). Jack Johnson, an African American boxing champion, was charged under the 1910 Mann Act in 1912 and was sentenced to one year on prison for crossing state boundaries with a gift-laden white mistress which, according to state authorities, constituted prostitution (Nagel 2003). Johnson’s legal circumstances are evidence of state resources contributing to stigmatizing interracial relationships between white women and black men by referring to them as sexual slavery or prostitution—anything but consensual.

### *Interracial Sex as Unpatriotic*

Another taboo tactic included constructing interracial sex as unpatriotic, and specifically not good for (white) America. The interracial sexual unions taboo, established to keep the white race “pure,” was drenched in patriotic rhetoric which framed racial-sexual “transgressors” as nationally disloyal. Well-known American inventor Benjamin Franklin, who was a slave owner, declared that “amalgamation with the other color produces a degradation to which no lover of his country, no lover of excellence in the human character can innocently consent” (quoted in Feagin 2001:77). This statement not only equates “whiteness” as well as dedication to “whiteness” with what it means to be a true American, but it implies any deviation from “pure whiteness” (i.e. interracial sexual relations) as inevitably non-consensual, which undoubtedly amplified the “black male rapist” myth. Franklin’s statement was nonsensical because one of countless examples of “amalgamation with the other color” would include white male slave masters raping black female slaves to produce more exploitable human chattel. These acts were repeatedly committed by slave owners, none of whom were later known as “disloyal transgressors” for expanding the exploitation empire of slavery. However, Franklin’s clout as a renowned inventor



must not be overlooked. In acknowledging his powerful influence, it is important to consider how his message is simultaneously a reflection and perpetuation of a racist discourse that explicitly targets interracial intimacy.

### *Interracial Sexuality as Incest*

Political actors spewing racist-turned-patriotic rhetoric were not the only methods through which anti-miscegenation animus was generated. Miscegenation or interracial sexual and/or marital unions have historically been conflated with incest, which is the strongest of all sexual taboos (Sollors 1997). However, a concise understanding of miscegenation and incest demonstrates that these concepts are in fact oxymoronic. A definition rid of societal overtones of miscegenation is out-group sexual relations, while incest is in-group sexual relations. Thus, it would be impossible to engage in sexual activity with an out-group member who is, simultaneously, an in-group member. Although these terms are still opposite in how they are structured as a sexual taboo, they are often strategically intertwined due to social constructions of family members and racial group membership.

The “in” and “out” groups are defined differently, because miscegenation refers to groups based on race while incest refers to groups based on kinship. Therefore, it is illogical that an individual can be constructed as *both* a family member *and* someone who is outside of your race considering that racial group membership is ascribed through family lineage. Using slavery relations as an example, the reasoning behind a black/white biracial female slave being “outside” of her white master’s race is grounded in the “one drop rule,” which discounts that the female slave indeed shares the ascribed racial background of her slave master/father; however, this shared lineage may not be socially, politically or legally acknowledged. Thus, if these

individuals were to engage in sexual intercourse, incest would be occurring, but miscegenation would not be occurring because the father is white and the daughter shares white ancestry as well (through her father). However, it is worth mentioning that there is one parallel between miscegenation and incest. Society determines *who* belongs to each group. Additionally, the determining factors of what constitutes group membership of both races and families have changed over time (Lopez 2006). Despite the inaccurate conflation of miscegenation and incest, they have historically been intertwined in film and literature (Sollors 1997).

Notably, this form of interracial sexuality that is conflated with incest in literature entails the reverse of the gendered and racialized arrangement of the strongest interracial sexual taboo (i.e. the white partner is male instead of female) in substantially more cases. While this conflation with incest does not include the white women/black men prototype, it still connotes white male domination because it demonstrates how white males sexually assault black women who then bear (according to the “one drop of black blood rule”) “black” children who also have the potential to be sexually violated by white males if these mixed-race children are female. Furthermore, the collective institutional measures implemented to prevent and stigmatize black men/white women interracial sexuality far outweigh their white men/black women counterparts, despite the fact that the latter of cases tend to be considered non-consensual.

### *Interracial Sexuality as Tragic*

Miscegenation and incest were paralleled frequently in early 19<sup>th</sup> century literature perhaps as a reflection of the institutionalized rape of black women during slavery. A common plot for these fictional stories included a white slave master having sexual relations with his female slave, which signified miscegenation (Sollors 1997). Further in the plot, it became

apparent that the white slave master was also the female slave's biological father, which constitutes father-daughter incest (Sollors 1997). Additionally, some stories portrayed a young white male falling in love with a young black female, usually a slave, only to later be informed that these two lovers were in fact siblings who shared the same father (Sollors 1997). This example symbolizes brother-sister incest in addition to miscegenation, if you subscribe to the "one drop" rule. However, in some of the brother-sister incest stories, both lovers appeared phenotypically white; and interestingly, the more perverse and horrific realization was the fact that the female had "black blood," not the fact that the lovers were siblings (Sollors 1997). These representations show interracial relationships as tragic, sad and most importantly, unsuccessful or unrealistic.

In 1912, a film entitled *The Debt* portrayed a biracial female who fell in love with a white male who she grew up with (Bogle 1994; Hall 2000). When they decided to marry, they were informed that they were siblings; they had the same father and the biracial character's mother was their father's black mistress (Hall 2000). The tragedy of this story lied primarily not in the fact that the two lovers are brother and sister, but that the female's "white skin and blue eyes that would otherwise define her as white are irrelevant rendering her social identification as black" (Hall 2000:88). The title of the film is worth mentioning as it implies that a debt must be paid to society by the biracial character for passing as white, even though she herself was unaware of her "black blood." Once again we see the common theme of a love story that becomes catastrophic for not one, but two reasons, although one is regarded as more salient than the other. These stories serve as a cautionary tale of interracial intimate relations by portraying them as disastrous, hurtful and detrimental to the family unit as a whole.

*Interracial Sexuality as Loveless*

Interracial sex has not only been constructed as taboo in the past; contemporary studies show interracial couples being discriminated against (Dalmage 2000) and facing additional layers of relationship obstacles (Chito Childs 2005). Also, the mass media portrays interracial relationships as grounded in a sexual or physical connection that lacks emotional intimacy (Beeman 2007). In addition, well-known race and gender scholars trivialize interracial intimacy by reducing it to a racially exciting, sex-based attraction that is as heavily defined by ideologies as Benjamin Franklin's rational. Nagel's interpretations of black male/white female interracial sexuality are based on what interracial sex signifies in American society rather than sexual desire rid of racial overtones.

Like their black male partners, many white women were infatuated with the notion of sex across the color line, though often for different reasons. For many white women, black men represented exotic and powerful sexuality. For many black men, white women were especially loaded sexual and political signifiers whose meanings were not always flattering. Black men and white women also faced different pressures. Some black men felt pressured to "prove" their manhood by crossing the black-white forbidden sexual frontier. Some white female activists felt pressured to prove their racial liberalism by making themselves sexually available (2003:119).

Nagel does not explicitly state how she comes to the sole conclusion of white women and black men's racially-motivated "infatuate[ion]" with one another or why she does not entertain other possible motivations behind black men/white women partnerships. Furthermore, in her analysis of breaching the white/black color line, she primarily cites African American scholars whose biases are evident when analyzed with a critical lens. Collins not only singles out relationships between black men and white women as "sexualized" as if these are the only romantic relationships that involve sex, she also proceeds to explain how the mere presence of biracial children, as symbols of interracial intimacy, are reminders of the rejection of black women. Her subjectivity is palpable in *Black Feminist Thought* where she claims

The birth of biracial or mixed-race children speaks to the reality of these sexualized love relationships between Black men and White women...Even in the face of rejection by Black men that leaves so many without partners, ironically, Black women remain called upon to accept and love the mixed-race children born to their brothers, friends and relatives. By being the Black mothers that these children do not have, these women are expected to help raise biracial children who at the same time often represent tangible reminders of their own rejection (2000:165).

In *Black Sexual Politics* Collins (2005) continues to trivialize interracial sexuality and disregard the lived experiences of a fellow scholar when she audaciously<sup>5</sup> declares that “Maria Root [a multiracial researcher] seems mesmerized by her own book’s title. In *Love’s Revolution*, [Root] clearly sees interracial love and marriage as ‘revolutionary’” (264). Using strong words like “mesmerized,” which to some degree questions Roots’ scholarly contribution, Collins seems to belittle Root’s reality as a multiracial researcher. What motivates Collins’ dismissal of the “revolutionary” results of interracial partnerships, especially considering that she has not experienced this reality first-hand? Furthermore, why does she feel entitled and qualified to evaluate and underestimate a reality that is foreign to her as a monoracial black person? Collins’ assertions are particularly noteworthy given her career as a black feminist who has staunchly challenged white feminists for discounting black women’s realities. Why would she then resort to discounting other scholars who are marginalized and whose experiences are misconstrued? Obviously, Collins’ perspective as an African American woman cannot be removed from her “scholarly” contributions to the black male/white female interracial sexuality literature.

Nagel and Collins are ground-breaking scholars in race research. As such, they heavily influence the academic discourse surrounding black men/white women erotic endeavors. Nagel

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<sup>5</sup> I use the term “audaciously” because Maria Root’s book *Love’s Revolution* is in part a reflection of Root’s reality as a multiracial individual. Collins minimizes Root’s interpretation of her *own* reality, which is audacious considering that Collins’ pioneering sociological contributions reflect her reality as an African American woman. One could easily argue that Collins is just as “mesmerized” by her book title *Black Feminist Thought*, which, too, is a reflection of her collective experiences as a black woman.

does not problematize the limited assumptions about black men and white women as sexual partners and as a white women herself, uncritically accepts black female researchers' assertions that are drenched in their own intraracial prejudices. Collins proclaims numerous adverse effects to black men dating white women and bearing biracial children, all of which are centered around black women's feelings of historical rejection. She does not mention the challenging and sometimes, dangerous reality that these interracial couples<sup>6</sup> and their children<sup>7</sup> endure, which further illuminates her agenda as a black woman who obviously disagrees with this form of interracial sexuality. This research is highly problematic for the discipline of sociology because it does not critically analyze interracial sexuality comprehensively. These scholars limit their analysis to a framework that is startlingly reminiscent of historical constructions of interracial relationships as a moral anathema. The academic discourse subscribes to previous racist rhetoric that constructs white women/black men unions as not only intrinsically sexual, but markedly disconnected from any capacity of emotional, spiritual, psychological and intellectual stimulation that is reserved exclusively for intraracial partnerships. While many contemporary race scholars do not explicitly address black male/white female sexuality as a sexual taboo, yet they characterize such relationships as plagued by sexual "infatuations," which accordingly promotes intraracial sexuality as rid of eroticized fantasies of the racial "other" and therefore, superior at all levels of the dating—marriage spectrum.

### *Interracial Sexuality and Bi/Multiracial Children*

The anti-interracial animosity that conflates interracial intimacy with disloyalty, incest, rape, and ultimately, a threat to society, does not end with the interracial couple. This sentiment

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<sup>6</sup> See Dalmage 2000.

<sup>7</sup> See Buckley and Carter 2004; Cheng and Lively forthcoming; Funderburg 1994; Kilson 2001; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2008; Root 1996 and Twine 2004.

is felt by the family members of interracial couples and most prominently, it lands directly in the lives of their children if they decide to build a family. In fact, the research on bi/multiracials is conducted precisely due to the implications of having more than one racial background considering the history of racial relations and specifically, racial segregation in the United States. Scholars have explored racial identity and social psychological well-being in order to understand how race operates in post-slavery, post-Civil Rights society for the bi/multiracial community. These researchers have found that racial identity is a contentious topic because of the racial binary; some bi/multiracials feel forced into one racial category while others freely choose one racial ancestry to identify with as a political or personal statement (Funderburg 1994; Kilson 2001; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2008; Renn 2004; Root 1996). This same racial binary is fodder for stigmatizing interracial sexuality. Also, studies have shown high rates of social exclusion and marginalization in adolescent years (Bracey et al. 2004; Campbell and Eggerling-Boek 2006; Cheng and Lively 2009; Binning et al. 2009) as a result of racial hybridity. Interracial couples have expressed similar experiences, being alienated at their workplace or even within their families (Harmon 2009). There is a strong link between how interracial sex is constructed in American society—both historically and contemporarily—and how as a society, we have contended with the product of interracial sex. Consequently, we see common threads between how interracial couples and bi/multiracial children are regarded because both groups fundamentally challenge a 400 year concept: the racial binary. Outlining the amount of institutional resources that have been expended in preventing and stigmatizing interracial unions are necessary to understand the intense effort of maintaining distinct races. In the following chapters, I will analyze what happens when distinct races are not maintained, but rather are mixed through parentage, are muddled through phenotype and are manipulated through social

interactions. Through the voices of my respondents, I will document the everyday experiences of black/white biracials.



## Chapter 4

### Race and Resemblance: Exploring Relationships in Multiracial Families

My mom is amazing, my mom is my life...but I don't *look* like her... She's got this long, red hair and green eyes...Sometimes I'm like "Oh my God, this is not okay."

~Nina, 25 years old

In the previous chapter, I drew parallels between the types of discrimination that interracial couples face and bi/multiracial children endure by showing how they overlap and intersect because they stem from the same ideology. In this chapter, I document how comments, insults and assumptions that are also rooted in racist ideology shape intimate family bonds. In exploring the child/parent and sibling/sibling relationships in multiracial families, I show how these ties are influenced by how much respondents "look" like their parents and siblings with regard to racial resemblance, or lack thereof. By reflecting on their earliest childhood memories to their most recent racial encounters, their narratives support other studies that argue that bi/multiracial families continue to be constructed as outside of the American norm. At the same time, I build on this scholarship by detailing the impact of this marginalization on family interactions, family relationships and the family dynamic as a whole.

The rescinding of anti-miscegenation laws in 1967 (Lopez 2006) not only expanded marriage options for Americans but as a result, it also altered family formation patterns that have led to changes in the U.S. Census, ongoing racial identity politics debates and new racial vocabularies. The time period following the landmark *Loving vs. Virginia* U. S. Supreme Court decision has been recognized as the "biracial baby boom" because it has generated a steadily increasing bi/multiracial population (Root 1992:3). This population has modified the traditional definition of families with the influx of multiracial and multiethnic families (DaCosta 2007; Dalmage 2000; Rockquemore and Henderson 2010). Consequently, bi/multiracial children and

multiracial families are increasingly becoming the focus of news stories, policy changes and best-selling memoirs. Additionally, bi/multiracial Americans have disrupted racial identity binaries and asserted new racial classification schemes (Funderburg 1994; Korgen 1998; Renn 2004) or rejected the concept of race altogether (Kilson 2001; Rockquemore and Brunnsma 2008). But research has not positioned bi/multiracials' *relationships* with their mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers at the center of an analysis. In this chapter, I concentrate on relationships with a critical racial lens by asking the question: how does race, and more specifically, phenotypic resemblance, shape kinship relationships in multiracial families?

Most of the scholarly literature on bi/multiracial children and adults revolves around racial identification processes (Funderburg 1994; Kilson 2001; Renn 2004; Rockquemore and Brunnsma 2008) or social psychological well-being (Bracey et al. 2004; Campbell and Eggerling-Boek 2006; Binning et al. 2009; Cheng and Lively 2009). Although a growing trend in the literature looks at family racial socialization (Samuels 2009; Snyder 2012; Twine 2010), this scholarship emphasizes how parents teach their children about race and racism, or lack thereof. These studies do not revolve around the intricacies of family relationships, and few, if any, mention siblings. Notably, Twine's research calls attention to the monoracial parents' perspective and Samuels (2009) investigates how transracial adoption impacts racial socialization by exploring the experiences bi/multiracial children raised by white adopted parents. Snyder's work (2012) also includes transracially adopted bi/multiracials. The aim of my study is to illuminate the complexities of family relationships in a multiracial family residing in a highly color-conscious society.

Although bi/multiracial Americans are the fastest growing minority group in the United States (Bonam and Shih 2009) and, multiracial families are on the rise, the relationships that

comprise a multiracial family have received relatively little empirical attention. Literary works paint a picture of the relationships between parents and children in multiracial families that are woven into a larger story about overcoming racial adversity in adolescence and young adulthood (Cross 2006; Obama 2004; Nissel 2007; Walker 2001). The purpose of this chapter is to empirically examine relationships in multiracial families with an emphasis on how race and resemblance shape those relationships based on how the family is perceived

## **Background Literature**

### *Multiracial Families*

The long history of legal, political, economic and social sanctions against interracial coupling and subsequent multiracial family formation was documented in the previous chapter. However, for the purposes of this chapter, it is worth mentioning that the most obvious legal restriction against interracial intimacy, and subsequently, bi/multiracial Americans, was anti-miscegenation laws which prohibited the legal union or in some states, even cohabitation of different races and were enacted in 1662 (Zackodnick 2001). This legalized government intervention is noteworthy because it ultimately preserved the physical, yet understood as “racial,” differences “by limiting entrance to certain physical types and by altering the range of marital choices available” to the American population (Lopez 2006:11). In sum, federal legislation historically shaped reproductive choices for women and men, and as a result, it largely determined the *physical features* of the American population. These racialized physical features, also called phenotypes, play a key role in how my participants and their family members experience the world.

Due to historical institutional arrangements, it has been argued that “[t]he notion of a ‘multiracial family’ has, until very recently, been an oxymoron in American cultural

consciousness” (DaCosta 2004:20). After *Loving vs. Virginia* legalized interracial marriage, there was an increase in interracial couples and marriages (Gullickson 2006); however, interracial couples still face discrimination as they learn to navigate the largely separate worlds, particularly black and white, (Chito Childs 2005), and as they become members of and build multiracial families (Dalmage 2000). The challenges of raising children with fundamentally different racial experiences and ties to multiple racial communities are evident in both scholarly literature (Frankenburg 1993; Twine 20010) and literary, auto-biographical works (Lazarre 1996). Correspondingly, monoracial parents’ racially informed parenting techniques have been emerging in the literature (Samuels 2009; Twine 2010) which is useful considering that bi/multiracial children continue to report struggles with fitting in black and white peer groups. Research shows that they engage in strategies to generally “pass” as black and in fewer cases, white (Khanna and Johnson 2010) in addition to being “force[d] to pass” (Rockquemore 2005:17) due to the rigidity of racial boundaries. In highlighting hurtful and, in some cases, defining experiences with friends and acquaintances, this chapter shows how contending with the racial boundaries of resemblance shape family interactions and over time, family relationships. Also, going beyond peers, I call attention to the role that strangers and even teachers play in intensifying respondents’ understandings of phenotypic resemblance within their family, or lack thereof.

### *Family Relationships and Racial Socialization*

Family studies research suggests a number of factors that influence each family bond as well as the entire family dynamic such as birth order (Whiteman, McHale and Crouter 2011), divorce (Yu et al. 2010) and mental health illnesses (Taylor et al. 2008). Similarly, because race is ascribed through family lineage, the racial background(s) of a family shape(s) the interactions

and experiences of the family as a whole through racial socialization. The accumulation of these interactions and experiences shapes family relationships in both positive and negative ways, regardless of racial heritage. For example, Feagin, Vera and Batur argue that white “[p]arents’ racist teachings can cause children much unnecessary pain” when referring to a white woman whose mother told her “the niggers would come in the night and steal us away and use us for their pleasure” to compel her to behave (2001:214). Their interviewee confirmed that this threat was effective, admitting that she was “scared...to death” (Feagin, Vera and Batur 2001:214). Other studies reiterate how whites learn about race through confusing and uncomfortable conversations with their family (Picca and Feagin 2007; Trepagnier 2010). Studies on African American family socialization show that parents raise children to be aware and proud of the history of racial struggle and to rely on family as a support system (Suizzo, Robinson and Pahlke 2008) and religion and/or spirituality to cope with the effects of institutional racism (Sharpe and Boyas 2011).

Family bonds are shaped by more than race. The complex interplay of race, gender and physical features have a bearing on how family bonds develop in black families (Wilder and Cain 2010). In *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color among African Americans* (Russell, Wilson and Hall 1992:3), a black woman describes her relationships with her sisters:

My sisters hate me...but it’s not my fault. When company comes over, my Papa, who’s so proud of this long, straight hair of mine, makes me come sit in the dining room with him and his friends. My sisters, who have short ‘n’ nappy hair, have to stay in the kitchen...I hate my hair, I’d rather my sisters liked me.

This woman’s strained relationship with her sisters is shaped by racist ideologies that have been internalized by African Americans since slavery and have influenced family socialization by privileging light skin, long hair and white facial features (Parmer et al. 2004). This process of

internalized oppression has shaped self-esteem (Thompson and Keith 2004) and dating choices (Wilder and Cain 2010) among African Americans as well as other communities of color (Glenn 2009). Similarly, these same racist ideologies have influenced my interviewees' family ties by associating family membership with phenotypic resemblance and racial homogeneity, and thereby de-legitimizing family relationships that do not correspond with ideological assumptions.

### **Data and Analysis**

Belonging to a multiracial family that consists of monoracial parents and biracial children (and in some cases, also monoracial children) creates a family dynamic that is still considered anomalous in American society, despite "post-racial" discourses. In this chapter, I analyze the impact of public and personal perceptions on familial relationships between a child and her/his mother, father and sibling(s). First, I explore the public perceptions of multiracial families to show the variety of ways in which my respondents were reminded that they their family is an atypical family due to their racial heterogeneity. Secondly, I outline respondents' parents' strategies that counter these perceptions to show how monoracial parents engage with their bi/multiracial children about belonging to a multiracial family. Lastly, I examine respondents' personal perceptions of their relationships with their parents and siblings. Notably, participants' personal perceptions of their kinship ties are inseparable from public perceptions of family membership; they rely on similar explanations of race and resemblance when describing their family bonds.

#### *Public Perceptions: The Significance of Racial Resemblance in Families*

One of the dominant themes in respondents' narratives was others' assumption that they were adopted when they were with a parent with whom they did not racially resemble. This assumption was based entirely on racial resemblance determined by similarity of skin color and

hair texture, and has been documented in other studies about multiracial families (Dalmage 2000; Funderburg 1994). This common trend underscores the resilience of essentialist categories of race (Omi and Winant 1994) that continue to be reproduced in a supposedly “post-racial” era (Bonilla-Silva 2010). The perpetual assumption by others about respondents’ adopted status had a strong impact on how participants’ families were perceived. The general inability of people to recognize, acknowledge and legitimize diverse families generated feelings of embarrassment, confusion and in some cases, insecurity, simply because their family was considered abnormal.

Nicole is 23 years old and her brother Raymond is 19 years old. They grew up in a “pretty white,” upper-middle class suburb in the Northeastern United States. Both of their first memories of race include being asked in elementary school if they were adopted. Nicole explains that her classmates “only saw my mom, they never saw my dad so, like, *clearly* [sarcastic tone] a white woman can’t have a brown child.” Similarly, Raymond recalls being mistaken for adopted countless times when he was picked up from daycare by his white mother.

Growing up, I always knew that it was weird—that it didn’t fit—that every day I was getting picked up by my mom who was white and it was just like...I knew everyone was looking at her funny like, “What is this white woman doing with this lil’ black child?” And I was like “I’m not adopted, this *is* my mom.” I’m only half black but the way things work, I came out with black skin color. Two of my brothers came out white. So it’s just, like, you come out [looking] however. But I’m not adopted or anything.

Elijah, a 22-year-old college graduate, reflected on his first racial memory where he also recalled someone assuming he was adopted in his childhood. “I was young, maybe like 7 [years old], and I remember me and my sister were walking with my mother. Um, somebody asked her, you know they didn’t know that we were listening, but somebody asked her if we were adopted. I remember I thought ‘Oh...I guess I don’t look like my mom.’” In this quote, Elijah makes it clear that not resembling his (white) mother makes his family different from other families, and therefore, worthy of inquiry to complete strangers.

In addition to being assumed to be adopted, many participants shared stories about being in public with their parents and/or siblings and people assuming that the family members were not together. In some cases, these circumstances caused a scene. Amber, a 22-year-old college student, describes a situation where her mother was not recognized as part of her family ironically at the most family-oriented occasion: a family reunion. Her experience shows how racially heterogeneous families are still perceived as out of the ordinary.

Just to be told that this is not your family...that's kinda hard. It's hurtful to your parents as well. I remember when we were at my [black] dad's family reunion and people were loading the bus and the bus driver was standing by the door letting people go and my [white] mom goes to get on the bus and he says "Oh, you must have the wrong bus" [laughs]. And my mom was like "No, this is my bus," and my dad's whole family, there were like 40 of us, we all got off the bus and said "We want a new bus driver! This is ridiculous and offensive!"

Leila, 24-years-old, is racially ambiguous; she is often assumed to be a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds, including Puerto Rican, Dominican or "black and something" depending on whom she is surrounded by. She explains how she is perceived when she is with her white mother in a public setting.

Funny story, well not funny story, but typical experience will be if I am in a predominately white town with my mother and people kind of give [us] a second look...like "Are they lesbians?" It's very strange. Or they don't think we're together. We'll be in line and she'll start ordering something and they'll ask me to the next counter and I'll be like "I'm with her. *Hello*, I just called her Mom!"

Leila's recollections seem paradoxical; people either presume that she is romantically involved with her mother or they assume that Leila and her mother have no relation/connection at all. Her experience highlights the complexity of experiences that bi/multiracials encounter in public, none of which include the assumption of biological ties.

Notably, Leila is not the only respondent who was assumed to be dating the parent whom she/he least racially resembled. Steven, a green-eyed, light-skinned, but racially indistinct 26-



year-old graduate student, explains “When I go out to eat with my [white] mom, people usually assume that we are dating, which is just bizarre because she is clearly much older than me. It’s never a possibility that I’m her son. Never.” Similarly, Malcolm, an 18-year-old high school student, expressed similar experiences with his black father, who is fifty years older than him. “I’m light-skinned and most people think I’m white. There have been times when I’ve been out with my dad and people never think we’re related. They think everything *but* that, like, even that we are partners...it’s so weird because he’s 68 years old.” Respondents characterize these experiences as “strange,” “bizarre” and “weird” but the frequency of these assumptions communicates understandings about race, family and relationships. The tendency for strangers to assume biracial children are dating the parent whom they seem to not (phenotypically) resemble illuminates the significance of racial resemblance in families. This finding is particularly noteworthy considering the substantial age differences between interviewees and their parents. Furthermore, this finding indicates the sexualization of interracial dyads, by assuming that contact between two people who appear to be of different racial background, regardless of gender, presumes sex, not friendship or kinship. Previous research underscores the hyper-sexualization of interracial relationships (Chito Childs 2009; Frankenburg 1993); however, these studies are about people who are actually dating interracially, and not assumed to be simply because of their race and close proximity.

The reoccurring theme of biracial children being told that they “do not look like” at least one of their parents becomes more complex when they bear significant resemblance to their parent, but their skin color trumps other physical features such as facial shape, eye shape, lip size or form, dimples, etc. Aaliyah, a 25-year-old college student and mother, asserts that she “looks exactly like my mom, I mean *identical*, except I’m a little bit darker and my hair is tight curls.

Hers is wavy.” Some research suggests that physical resemblance serves as “explicit evidence” of family membership, even in mixed-race families (Figueroa 2008:289), yet my respondents’ narratives reveal the extent to which skin complexion reigns as the dominant character of resemblance, and accordingly, serves as a hallmark of family membership.

The salience of racial resemblance is also evident among siblings. Saul, a 20-year-old carpenter, discussed the standard response from strangers when he is in public with his white mother, white stepfather and younger monoracial white half-sister. “We are all really close but I always feel weird going, you know, out to dinner with my mom, my stepdad and my little sister...then there is me. People look at us like ‘How is he connected to them?’” Saul’s older sister, Celeste, who is a 25-year-old nurse, offered a similar account of people not comprehending her biological connection to her white half-sister. Celeste explained, “My little sister’s 7 [years old] but she doesn’t see, like, color. She’ll be like ‘That’s my sister,’ and her friends will be like ‘Your sister? But she’s a different color.’ And she’ll be like ‘So!’” In these situations, Saul and Celeste show how other family members, in this case, their younger white half-sister who racially resembles both of her white parents, are not immune to the de-legitimization that occurs within multiracial families. At the age of 7, their younger sister Molly does not face de-legitimization with her white parents but she does endure these experiences with her older biracial sister and two biracial brothers.

#### *Reactions to Perceptions: Parental Strategies to Prepare and Protect Their Children*

Participants recalled numerous circumstances where they relayed a hurtful racial encounter regarding their multiracial family to their parent(s), and their parent(s) subsequently talked to them about the implications of being black *and* white in a country with an internationally notorious racist history. These conversations not only involved friends or peers, but also incorporate peoples in

positions of authority, such as a teacher. Respondents expressed a great deal of gratitude towards their parents for these conversations that allowed them to vent, experience validation and strengthen their child/parent bond. Notably, most of these recollections included the participants' mother, who, in most cases, is the white parent. This is not a rare finding; previous studies show that white mothers (and fathers) of bi/multiracial children deliberately develop what Twine coins "racial literacy," which includes "a form of consciousness that enables them to perceive routine and subtle forms of everyday racism that were not previously visible to them" (2010:92), considering that they are white and enjoyed the advantages of white privilege (McIntosh 1988). However, upon having bi/multiracial children, their white privilege becomes restricted, particularly with white single mothers, and they endure social sanctions themselves as they help their children cope with racist acts in school, with extended family and in their local communities (Harman 2010).

Giorgio, a 23-year-old phenotypically white respondent, described a circumstance in Sunday school when his teacher vehemently challenged his racial heritage based on his Italian name coupled with his phenotype (e.g. fair skin tone and straight hair). This teacher delegitimized Giorgio's multiracial family by relentlessly proclaiming that Giorgio's self-identified racial heritage was a falsehood.

This story sticks out in my head *so* hard. The Sunday school teacher one day asked everybody's race. I was probably like six, seven [years old]. So she comes to me and my name is Giorgio Pezzello so everyone's thinking "Eh, he's *Italian*." So she was like "Giorgio, what's your background? Italian?" I almost didn't want to stick up for myself. I felt, like, awkward saying it. I was like "Oh, black and white." She was like "What? Wow, *really*?" I was like "Yeah, my dad is black and my mom is white." She was like "No way! No, you're not!" And, like, she was *fighting* me about what I'm telling her. And as a kid—that young—I was eventually just like "...Yeah" [sighs]. I didn't know what to say, I got awkward and I got really mad. I was, like, really offended, you know what I mean?

Giorgio characterizes this exchange as the “the most uncomfortable that I have ever felt” and explains how his mother’s reaction provided him with the comfort and confidence that helped him navigate future de-legitimizing experiences. He exclaimed “Mamas always come through [i.e. are reliable]! I told my mom and she went up to the school to talk to my teacher. She told her that she shouldn’t be asking those kinds of questions and it [race] shouldn’t matter anyway.” Giorgio’s mother then withdrew him from the class. He expressed that his mother’s reaction to his teacher validated his experiences in addition to modeling behavior for how he would manage future encounters of de-legitimization and/or stigmatization of his multiracial family or background.

Denise, a 21 year old college student, was raised by her white mother, her maternal grandparents and her white stepfather. She recalls building friendships mostly with white students in her racially diverse high school because they shared the same interests, such as cheerleading. In discussing her childhood, she elucidates the role that her mother has played in helping her maintain integrity and sanity despite painful experiences of social marginalization because of her biracial ancestry.

I had [white] next door neighbors who wouldn’t let me go in their pool and when I asked why, they said *because you’re black*...and I ran home crying. When we’d play grocery store, they’d tell me I had to be the bagger because I was black. I would go home and cry to my mom all the time. I had a friend come over who saw my mother and [white] stepdad and asked if I was adopted. I said “No” and she was like “Well, but, your mom’s white...why?”

This example again highlights the de-legitimization that multiracial family members experience, which may become more pronounced when one of the parents does not reside in the household. In Denise’s case, a respondent who could never “pass” as white, her absent black father and present white stepfather compelled her young friend to assume that she was adopted, rather than considering the possibility that Denise was biologically related to her white mother. After

conveying this incident to her mother, she told Denise “...you’re different because you are black *and* you are white. That’s going to be confusing for people, especially children.’ She would say they just don’t know any better, they are too young to really understand what they said.” Denise described her mother as honest and hopeful about such experiences, vindicating Denise’s feelings of hurt and frustration but also encouraging her daughter not to let painful experiences take an emotional toll. “She said one day they might even apologize. They never did, but I appreciate her message.” Her mother’s guidance in these circumstances shaped the way Denise maneuvered subsequent situations, particularly with peers who attempted to alienate or tease her because of her biracial ancestry.

Delilah, 26 years old, grew up in a military household and later joined the military. One of the most travelled participants in my study, she has lived in two countries and six states and has been exposed to a variety of regional and cultural understandings of race and racial categories in the Southern, Midwestern, Northeastern, and Southwestern United States. She shared a traumatic childhood experience in which she came to realize the magnitude of her stigmatized family structure living in the Southern US in the 1990s.

I had a birthday party in the fourth grade and I invited probably six or seven girls from my class. All of them said that they would come. I invited people who were both [races]; I remember that. My mom talked to their parents, everything was fine. Then on my birthday, not a single person came. When I went to school, I asked them “Hey, I had my party and everyone said they would come, like, how come no one came?” They didn’t really have much to say.

Delilah was devastated when none of her friends attended her party; she never planned a birthday party again. Her mother explained her friends’ absence in the context of race, region and religion. She assured Delilah that her friends’ had no say in the matter and that their parents probably did not agree with interracial marriages because of Southern cultural beliefs. Delilah’s mother instilled in her that she was “a human being first and foremost,” as a means to reject

racial stereotypes about Delilah's heritage, and encouraged Delilah to feel sorry for people who limited their lives by race. Her mother would often critique the "hypocritical Southern Christian culture" to counter the frequent messages of family stigmatization and de-legitimization. This message was reiterated throughout her life. Delilah critically evaluated racially motivated remarks by staunchly proclaiming that she refused to allow such comments to determine her future because, in her words, "then racism wins."

White parents' thorough explanations of the historical background of interracial relations and contemporary implications of the past have been detailed in previous literature (Twine 2010). This finding may be more common for white parents in interracial relationships due to their intimate and emotional bond with a person of color (Frankenburg 1993; Twine 2010). On the contrary, (adoptive) white parents coupled with other whites are less likely to communicate racial awareness by explicitly discussing race and racism (Snyder 2012). Parenting bi/multiracial children from a colorblind framework, particularly if also living in a predominately white community, leads to frustration, anger and "a loss of self and racial kinship," for bi/multiracials, although there are also gains to "being raised by white people" (Samuels 2009: 88). In some studies, transracially adopted racial and ethnic minority children and teenagers stopped sharing racially derogatory slights made by peers with their white adoptive parents, in part because they thought their parents would think it was "trivial or [would] lack relevant knowledge necessary for handling the problem" (Dorcan-Morgan 2010: 340).

#### *Personal Perceptions: The Impact of Race and Resemblance on Family Relationships*

As the previous section illustrated, family interactions are profoundly shaped by race, phenotype and stereotypes that accompany racial group membership. Therefore, family relationships are influenced by how parents and children decide to manage the series of

interactions that question their biological tie. Notably, how respondents perceive their own relationships parallel the public perceptions that were discussed in the first section; respondents explicitly express how race and resemblance, or lack thereof, color their kinship bonds. Similarly, transracial adoption literature on bi/multiracials reveals the role of racial resemblance and how lack of racial resemblance makes one's adopted status more pronounced when adopted by a white family (Samuels 2009).

Allen, a 21 year old college student, explains his relationships with his white mother and black father based on their personalities.

I'm very close with my mom and my dad...needs work. The reason why I am not close with him is because he's a very difficult person to get along with consistently. He gets very anxious and upset easily; he's kinda like a firecracker. Um, but I don't think race is a factor what-so-ever in that aspect.

Allen then mentioned race by drawing parallels between his relationships with his parents and his closeness with whites and blacks. "Since I'm really good friends with my mom, she has a huge influence on me. My dad doesn't have such a deep influence on me and I think that contributes to the fact that I have more of an association with white people." Allen appears phenotypically white with sandy blonde hair, fair skin and green eyes. Throughout the interview, he explains how he has mostly white friends and girlfriends, and "feels guilty" about not looking black and thus, not being treated like a black person. "People look at my dad and see a black person and make judgments right off the bat, I'm sure. But me, I blend in with a crowd of white people." Although Allen initially stressed that his relationship with his father is not influenced by race in any way, his comments suggest that because he is racially perceived as white, this distances him from the experiences of black people, including his father and other black relatives. In discussing a recent family reunion, he states, "It was, like, a *bunch* of African Americans and some of them date white girls and guys but I'm actually *blood related* to these

people and I feel like such an outsider.” Allen’s phenotypically white appearance makes him feel uncomfortable around his black family regardless of the fact that there are other white-looking people at the family reunion because the white guests are not “blood related” to his black family, and consequently do not need to *look black* to fit in. Allen’s story shows how race and resemblance shape his relationships with his father and other black family members.

Previous studies have documented the meaning and implications of diverse skin complexions in families of color; however, this scholarship concentrates on colorism, or the favoring of light skin tones (Burton et al. 2010; Wilder and Cain 2011). This literature does not address the *disadvantages* of having light skin as a person of African heritage, and as a result, feeling guilty about being disconnected from African American experiences, and by extension, African Americans as a whole, including relatives. Furthermore, colorism has been studied through a distinctly gendered lens that centers’ black women’s experiences (Thomas et al. 2011; Townsend et al. 2010; Wilder 2010), rarely drawing attention to black men’s experiences with skin color, family and relationships.

When Nina, a 25-year-old doctoral candidate, described her relationship with her mother, she became emotional about their intimate bond.

My mom is amazing, my mom is my life. I might cry talking about her. She went through so much stuff raising my brother and I [tears coming down her cheeks]. But she didn’t take care of herself...and she was never, like, comfortable with her body and even if she was, I don’t *look* like her. I don’t have her skinny little body. She’s got this long, red hair and green eyes. I never got her body, she has double D’s [breast size] and no butt. I have no boobs and a huge butt. All I wanted was big boobs. Sometimes I’m like “Oh my god, this is not okay.”

Nina’s relationship with her mother is inextricable from her mother’s phenotype, her mother’s body image and Western ideals of beauty. This quote exposes a complex intersection of race and gender that compares Nina’s body image to her mother, a white woman with long, red hair,



green eyes, a large chest and “no butt.” Nina has a light brown skin tone with curly brown hair that falls past her back with honey-colored eyes, a small chest and a “big butt.” Nina continued to discuss her relationship with her mother when she talked about her friends in high school. She voiced the racial disparities in body confidence that she observed among her female friends: “I’ve found that my black friends are way more comfortable with their body than my white friends. Now that I’m thinking about it, I think a lot of it has to do with their moms, *they* are more comfortable with *their* bodies.” While research shows that African American women are generally more satisfied with their bodies than white women, this satisfaction is moderated by a variety of interpersonal factors, such as peers, men and family (Kelch-Oliver and Ancis 2011). Moreover, studies show that African American women who spend a large amount of time with whites report higher levels of body dissatisfaction (Sabik, Cole and Ward 2010). Consequently, it is implied that white standards of beauty, because they are the dominant standard of beauty in American society, influence all women who have high rates of interaction with whites. However, in Nina’s case, this shapes one of her most intimate, formative relationships. Although she articulates undeniable respect and admiration for her mother, her relationship with her mother is shaped by the lack of racial resemblance, and the implications of this racial incongruity for family bonds. Hence, the gender and racial composition of the multiracial family has an impact on how mother/daughter relationships develop, specifically as they relate to femininity, body image and beauty ideals.

Olivia is a 30-year-old events planner who was raised by her white mother and her white stepfather. Olivia’s sister, Aubrey, was a former student of mine who shared her first racial memory during a class activity. She later became interested in my dissertation research and introduced me to her biracial sister to be interviewed. Aubrey accompanied Olivia during the

interview. In recalling the same racial memory that her monoracial white 20-year-old sister shared in class, Olivia explains:

I remember Aubrey was like 3 years old, barely old enough to talk or understand anything, and my mom told her that I'm half black and half white. And I remember she started crying! She was like "But what does that mean?" She was so upset [chuckling], like, it was so *literal* to her. How funny is that? She thought I was going to be split down the middle and literally be white on one side and black on the other!

Aubrey then interjected, "It was traumatic!" This dialogue was a defining moment in both of their lives; both sisters recalled this seventeen-year-old family conversation with their mother, and they recalled their reactions to this dialogue differently. Aubrey was traumatized by the information her mother shared and Olivia found Aubrey's literal interpretation amusing. This memory is noteworthy because their sibling relationship was characterized by a racial difference that was not pointed out by a peer or a stranger, but by their mother.

Furthermore, the role of racial resemblance in the family operates in a distinctly different way in Olivia's case. She appears phenotypically white; most people assume that she is Italian or Portuguese, never African American or black. Hence, Aubrey and Olivia both look white in terms of racial classification, but they are constantly told they do not resemble each other because Olivia has curly, dark brown hair (that she often straightens) and dark brown eyes and Aubrey has straight, blond hair and blue eyes. In this case, despite being racially perceived in the same way, their phenotypic differences trump racial similarities. Both sisters rolled their eyes when telling "annoying" stories about people emphasizing the racialized difference of their physical features and making remarks like "That's your *sister*? But she doesn't look anything like you!" They explained that these comments are probably more pronounced in multiracial families and carry a different meaning than in monoracial families where siblings might not resemble each other. The phenotypic variation between Olivia and Aubrey shaped how they

talked about their sisterhood and how they remembered their childhood. Also, their lack of racial resemblance in a way served as a catalyst for Aubrey introducing me to Olivia to be interviewed for my research.

The small amount of research on half-siblings focuses on parent/child relationships rather than sibling/sibling relationships (Schlomer, Ellis and Garber 2010) or emphasizes the negative impact that half-siblings can have on a family structure and a child's development (Strow and Strow 2008) or a sibling's mental health (Yuan 2009). Notably, these studies do not mention half-siblings in multiracial families. Scholarship on siblings and resemblance is often termed "facial resemblance" (Bressan et al. 2009), and therefore is devoid of an analysis that explores the significance of racialized physical features in sibling relationships. Considering the increase in multiracial families and bi/multiracial children, scholars would benefit from a more nuanced understanding of sibling relationships and racial resemblance.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

In her pioneering work two decades ago, Maria Root argued that the growing bi/multiracial population was "transforming the 'face' of the United States" (1992:3). Root was right. When the U.S. Census allowed Americans to claim more than one race for the first time in 2000, 6.8 million Americans reported at least two races (U.S. Census 2000); this number increased to 9 million ten years later (U.S. Census 2010). In addition, the most famous bi/multiracial person in the world, President Barack Obama, comes from a multiracial family. He regularly references his biracial ancestry from his "white Kansan mother" and "black Kenyan father" in his speeches. Collectively, the burgeoning bi/multiracial population and the election of a biracial president, although he is celebrated as black or African American, represent a critical racial juncture in American society. However, we limit our understanding of race, family

and structural changes if we simply look at numbers or isolated events. In order to comprehensively grasp the changing racial demographics and family formation patterns in this country, we must examine everyday interactions and family relationships. Black/white biracials are an optimal group to study multiracial family dynamics because they comprise the largest biracial cohort at 1.8 million (U. S. Census 2010). Through their life stories, we gain an understanding of a ubiquitous message: family membership is inherently linked to racial resemblance. Through this chapter, we are able to recognize how public and personal perceptions of family membership in turn shape intimate family bonds.

It is imperative to recognize the impact of the conventional single-race family script on relationships in multiracial families, including child/parent bonds as well as sibling/sibling ties. Through my respondents' voices, I call attention to how a variety of family relationships are shaped by race, and specifically racial resemblance in a series of ways. First, I analyze how participants' biological tie to their family was routinely called into question due to lack of (what is considered to be) similar racialized physical features, or racial resemblance. People often assume participants are adopted or dating before they consider the possibility that they might be family members. While other studies find that biracials are often assumed to be adopted (Dalmage 2000; Funderburg 1994), they do not discuss how this assumption can shape family relationships.

Secondly, I explain how respondents' parents' reactions to public perceptions of their multiracial family were key in shaping parent/child bonds. Interviewees recalled numerous discussions with their parents, usually their mother, about feelings of marginalization or stigmatization due to their multiracial family in which their mother would offer thoughtful, vindicating advice about how to process the painful experience and how to handle future racially

hostile experiences. Although scholars and autobiographical accounts have examined how monoracial parents teach their bi/multiracial children about race and racism, these studies center the parents' experiences (Lazarre 1997; Twine 2010) and do not analyze how these parenting strategies impact family relationships over time.

Thirdly, I show that respondents' personal perceptions of the mutual dialectic between racial resemblance and family membership have an impact on their relationships with their mothers, fathers and siblings. Although bi/multiracial scholarship draws connections between family, identity and relationships (Liebler 2004), this study does not look at black/white biracials. Furthermore, other studies explore family and relationships (Lorenzo-Blanco et al. 2013), yet they do so from data sets that are over 15 years old. To my knowledge recent research has not looked at how racial resemblance shapes family bonds, with exception of studies about transracial adoption (Samuels 2009), although even in this study, relationships are not the center of the analysis. These findings help illuminate what it means to be in a multiracial family in the 1990s and as recently as 2011. This chapter further emphasizes the unique challenges that multiracial family members endure, and the strategies that parents have employed to deal with these challenges. Also, these findings can inform and validate the experiences of monoracial parents, bi/multiracial children or adults and their monoracial siblings, and can outline ways for all family members to negotiate foreseeable racialized encounters that question family membership and inherently shape family relationships.

In conclusion, my findings support other studies within the racism literature that counter the twin "post-racial" (Bonilla Silva 2010) or "colorblind" (Herring, Keith and Horton 2004) myths that frame American society as entering an unprecedented era where race no longer matters in everyday experiences, opportunities or life chances. Members of a historically and

currently unrecognized family structure, participants in this study decenter these myths by painting a colorful portrait of family bonds that are inextricable from race. In fact, my respondents were relentlessly reminded that they were not merely children, but *biracial* children of a *white* or *black* parent. In some cases, they were not merely siblings, but a *biracial* sibling of a *white* or *black* sibling. These reminders served as salient markers of difference that punctured their most intimate relationships in powerfully poignant ways. Based on my findings, the link between racial resemblance and family relationships remains strong; therefore, more research is needed to develop a deeper analysis of the multiple dimensions of multiracial families, a rapidly growing family structure. I have built on family studies and race literature by offering a complex analysis of how race (and gender) function(s) in families that blur, but do not escape, racial boundaries. Future research should continue to explore the dynamics of multiracial families of a variety of racial backgrounds (i.e. white/Native American, Latino/Asian) and transracial adoption families as both groups are on the rise. More research in these areas will help us understand how to better serve these family units, and how to ultimately, redefine the definition of the “American family.”

## Chapter 5

### **“It’s Like We Have an ‘In’ Already:” The Racial Capital of Black/White Biracial Americans**

You kinda have that “in” already...because you can relate to black people better [than non-blacks] and you can relate to white people better [than non-whites].  
~Rudy, 19 years old

In the last chapter, I analyzed my respondents’ family relationships and how those relationships were shaped by whether or not they racially resembled their mothers, fathers and siblings. My goal in this chapter is to contribute to the theoretical framework of bi/multiracial studies by shifting the theoretical focus from racial identity and psychological well-being to the conceptual development of how race—embedded with assumptions, understandings and histories—shapes bi/multiracial Americans’ everyday social interactions with white and black Americans. The majority of my participants reported interacting differently during encounters with whites and blacks or when in predominately white settings versus predominately black settings as a means to establish racial in-group membership. In an effort to analyze these interactional patterns, I offer the concept of “racial capital” to call attention to the repertoire of racial resources (i.e. knowledge, experiences, meaning and language) that biracial Americans draw upon to negotiate racial boundaries in a highly racialized society. While past research on bi/multiracials has created conceptual frameworks for racial identity trends as well as social psychological development, these studies have not systematically considered how everyday interactions unfold, and how bi/multiracials draw upon a unique “tool kit” (Swidler 1986) to work within and around racial boundaries. Furthermore, while racism scholars have discussed the negotiation of racial boundaries for other populations that do not neatly fit into racial categories, such as second generation South Asian Americans (Purkayastha 2005), these processes have not been systematically addressed in the bi/multiracial population.

Scholars have predicted that by the year 2050, one in five Americans will identify with two or more racial ancestries (Cheng and Powell 2007). In fact, 5.6% of children under the age of 18 claimed two or more races in the 2010 Census and 2.1% of adults marked two or more racial backgrounds (Nasser and Overberg 2011), a significant change from the time when the “one drop” rule locked most bi/multiracial Americans into the black racial category unless they were phenotypically white (Johnson 2003). Given the opportunity to claim more than one race, this category has been growing: 9 million Americans reported more than one racial category in 2010 (U.S. Census 2010), up from 6 million in 2000 (U. S. Census 2000). Furthermore, it should be noted that the number of bi/multiracial Americans are most likely higher considering that some Americans with more than one racial background, such as President Obama, still mark one race on their Census form. While these numbers offer an interesting story considering the racial history of the United States, they only tell part of the narrative; they do not provide any information about the everyday experiences, interactions and negotiations that accompany being bi/multiracial in 21<sup>st</sup> century America.

First, I will outline what type of research has been done in the past and why and how it revolved around the “one drop” rule. This is significant because it explains why being biracial is different in a post-Civil Rights United States in the sense that biracials can now gain access to both worlds in a way that was highly unlikely when they were considered black due to the “one drop” rule. In the past two decades, social science has looked at the experiences of the burgeoning bi/multiracial population within the scope of three core areas: racial identity, social psychological well-being and family racial socialization. The initial and most prominent scholarship focuses on racial self-identification. Scholars have found that bi/multiracials identify in a myriad of ways that are dependent on a variety of factors, such as socio-economic status,



region and phenotype (Funderburg 1994; Kilson 2001; Renn 2004; Rockquemore and Brunson 2008). Racial self-identification was an intellectually rich starting point due to the “one drop rule,” also known as hypodescent, which reasons that one drop of “black blood” (i.e. black/African ancestry) deems a person black regardless of phenotype unless they successfully “pass” as white (Lopez 1996). This “rule” is a corollary of the racial binary, which by definition, disregards racial hybridity. The “one drop” rule dates back to the exploitation empire of slavery, and as chapter three indicated, this “rule” greatly shaped the social, legal, economic and political construction of mixed-race offspring by branding them as black, and therefore slaves. This construction amplified the property, wealth and domination of white slave masters (Ladson-Billings and Tate 2009).

However, the construction of the black American slave was nuanced; it was imbued with a status hierarchy that demarcated “house slaves” or “house negroes” (many of whom were the mixed-race offspring of the master and black female slaves) from “field slaves” or “field negroes;” and the former received preferential treatment (Hall 2008). Hence, it is clear that while mixed-race progeny were considered black, their blackness was riddled with caveats and even privileges. In other words, there was always a little bit of room to distinguish mixed-race blacks from “full” blacks. That room grew over the years and now part of the manifestation of that difference is being able to have access to the white world (and I argue later in this chapter, to gain racial capital). Moreover, in the post-slavery, pre-Civil Rights era, bi/multiracials were stigmatized as “tragic mulattos,” because their racial background was thought to induce inevitable tragedy due to intense confusion and lack of a clear-cut racial community (Talty 2003). This “tragic mulatto” trope was prevalent in literature (Sollors 2000) and films (Bogle 1993); and undoubtedly, functioned to some degree as a cautionary tale. Consequently, what

being biracial has been constructed as has evolved over time: during slavery being biracial was equivalent to being black and therefore, a slave; in a post-slavery era, being biracial was viewed as sad and tragic. In my study, I will explain how being biracial in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is no longer necessarily sad or tragic but instead can operate as an advantage when interacting with whites and blacks.

Thus, the history of mixed-race or bi/multiracial Americans, specifically those who possess white and black parentage, have occupied an unparalleled racial and social location in American history. Through their sheer existence, they probe the main artery of America by embodying both ends of the racial hierarchy. Through activism, research and memoirs, they push the envelope of racial boundaries, politics and vocabularies. Through their escalating numbers, they have penetrated mainstream popular culture with musical artists, athletes and politicians like Alicia Keys, Tiger Woods and President Barack Obama. While racial identity patterns inform my intellectual interests, identity development models are limited in unearthing how black/white bi/multiracials contend with their distinct racial and social status on a daily basis. In addition, social psychological theories do not offer a rich, complex, layered understanding of how bi/multiracials navigate racial boundaries precisely by showing how porous these boundaries can be for black/white biracials. Consequently, in this chapter, I aim to answer the following questions:

- How are every day, mundane experiences at school, work, with friends and when dating shaped by being black/white biracial?
- How does being both black and white influence acceptance from the black community and the white community?

- How does being both black and white guide experiences and conversations when interacting in a predominately white setting vs. predominately black setting?
- How do daily encounters, particularly with whites and blacks, unfold?

In order to answer these questions, I asked my respondents a series of questions regarding periods of their lives (childhood, adolescence and adulthood), settings (school, work and community/neighborhood), relationships (family, friends and significant others) to elicit information about a variety of experiences. Two specific questions were asked that relate to this chapter: “How are you treated by the black and white communities?” and “How do you treat these communities?” These questions invited participants to report if they were accepted as racial in-group members/racial insiders as well as the process of facilitating this status. Upon probing, respondents were asked pointedly how much exposure they had to whites and blacks, how they interact with whites and blacks, and if there was any distinction between the two racial groups by focusing on concrete memories of racialized encounters. I operationalize the term “interact” to mean four different mechanisms that participants deploy: what racialized information they choose to reference in a given interaction (knowledge), what racialized encounters they choose to reflect upon in a given interaction (experiences), what connotation they associate particular words with (meaning) and how they choose to communicate (language).

### *Conceptualizing Racial Capital*

Michael Eric Dyson argues that race is “...about how you use language, understand your heritage, interpret your history, identify with your kin, and figure out your meaning and worth to a society that places values on you beyond your control” (2009:183). One of the first themes that emerged in my interviews was a way of managing race, and all that it encompasses, or what I

refer to in this chapter as “racial capital.” It became clear that respondents detected cues that compelled them to interact in racially coded ways in predominately white or black settings or while interacting with a white or black person in a one-on-one social interaction. This interactional practice was deployed as a means to be accepted as a racial insider and to have access to the benefits of insider status. As I show in the analysis section, there was a pattern to this practice. While I discuss this later, for the purposes of a brief introduction, I organized my data to showcase how participants deploy “racial capital” in white and black communities. I define “racial capital” as the repertoire of racial resources (knowledge, experiences, meaning and language) that biracial Americans draw upon to negotiate or cope with racial boundaries in a highly racialized society.

*Socio-Historical Context: Racial Boundaries, Worldviews and Networks*

One respondent, Rudy, explicitly characterized being biracial as “you kinda have that ‘in’ already...” with both racial communities “because you can understand and relate to black people better [than non-blacks] and you can understand and relate to white people better [than non-whites].” Rudy’s statement would have no meaning if racial communities were not clearly defined and maintained; nor would his assertion carry significance if each racial realm did not have community-based cultural frames or information that engender, in Rudy’s words, an “in.” I illustrate how divergent cultural systems have emerged out of segregation, and how these systems have produced worldviews that have largely been preserved within each respective community with little probability of intersection.

Bonilla-Silva asserts that “...blacks and whites navigate two totally different ideological worlds...” (2010:152). These separate domains are a result of unequal structural arrangements

that have generated different life trajectories and realities due to racial segregation that created and later exacerbated racial boundaries (Lamont and Molnar 2002). In the introduction chapter, I documented the timeline of racial boundary maintenance to show how these racial worlds became distinct entities with respective worldviews (Smedley 2007) or cultural frames (Wilson 2009) over several generations. This timeline specified how historical racist practices have influenced contemporary structural arrangements and foregrounds the prospect and significance of developing “racial capital” through mostly white and black parents, and to a lesser degree, relatives, communities and social networks.

As a result of this systematic, generational disadvantage that has produced spatial isolation and disproportionately high rates of concentrated poverty, a distinct African American culture has developed in part as a corollary of oppression (Rhoden 2006) that includes “shared group constructions of reality” and social interactional patterns (Wilson 2009:43). A corresponding “generic meaning system” exists among white Americans, which Picca and Feagin refer to as a “white racial framing” that “encompasses many pieces of racialized knowledge and understanding that in concert shape human action and behavior in a myriad of ways that are often automatic or unconscious” (2007:9). Wacquant reaffirms the existence of a white cultural frame in contending that his French—as opposed to white American—background benefited his ethnographic endeavors in a poor, black community in Chicago “from the simple fact of not having the *hexis* of the average white American, which continually marks, if against his or her own best intentions, the impenetrable border between the [white and black] communities” (2004:10). Thus, as a result of ideologies, institutional arrangements and interactions, racial boundaries have been preserved (Purkayastha 2005). In the case of whites and blacks, two different racial worlds exist, each complete with ways of interpreting the world

through a respective white or black lens (Smedley 2007). Having an “in” in both white and black communities, accompanied by both cultural frames, is noteworthy considering the legacy of racial segregation that has rendered these communities “impenetrable.”

## **Data and Analysis**

### *Racial Capital Deployment*

Research shows distinct differences in the racial socialization of whites (Picca and Feagin 2007) and blacks (Nunnally 2010), regardless of class. Black/white biracials have the potential to access both forms of socialization, which is unique and can generate racial dividends. The majority of my respondents were raised by both parents, although not all of them lived with both parents for their entire childhood and young adulthood. Twenty-seven participants were raised by both parents, 4 were raised by both parents in their early life and then primarily by their mothers and/or extended family members, 6 participants were mostly raised by their mothers with frequent contact from their fathers (i.e. on weekends, holidays and during school breaks), 15 participants were raised by their mothers and/or extended family members, 6 were raised by their mothers and stepfathers and 2 were adopted (one by a white couple, one by a white/black interracial couple). Therefore, 37 (61%) of the respondents had frequent exposure to both parents and by extension, both racial groups at some or throughout their lives.

Most of the remaining participants developed relationships with the racial community that corresponds with their absent parent. This happened either as a result of living in a multiracial community and/or their own expectations that compelled them to forge a connection. Essentially, participants felt that precisely *because* they are black *and* white, they should have relationships with both white and black communities. Jasmine, who has two (adopted) white

parents attended a historically black college to feel more connected to blacks. Henry, who was raised by his Jamaican mother and never met his Italian father, majored in Italian in college because he reported “missing that part of me.” Significantly, 52 out of 60 participants (86.6%) reported feeling connected to both whites and blacks if not equally, then being able relate to whites better than most blacks can and vice versa. As a result of establishing strong ties to both communities, these individuals use racial resources to traverse racial boundaries by capitalizing on homophily preferences (McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook 2001) that manifest through race. In the following sections, I outline how racial capital is deployed through knowledge, experiences and meanings in white and black communities. I deliberately select interactions with respondents who are phenotypically incompatible with the person or group they interact with to show that racial capital can trump phenotype. Then I demonstrate how racial capital is deployed through language by juxtaposing how respondents report linguistically expressing themselves in each community. Lastly, I analyze the disadvantages of racial capital and I document futile attempts of racial capital deployment.

### *Deployment in the White Community*

Lawrence is the only person of color in his doctoral program. He navigates encounters with whites by initiating topics of conversation that are “not typically ethnic,” to negotiate racial boundaries that have been erected. As a result, Lawrence reports being accepted and being treated as more of an equal.

It’s all about assumptions in white communities and black communities. So what I try to do in white communities, if I feel as if they are going to focus *completely* on the color of my skin, then I bring up, um, things that are not *typically ethnic* to talk about. Um, [for instance], “Let’s talk about literature from Europe, let’s talk about European history.” Then they start to realize, “Wait a minute, he knows

about a lot more than just the color of his skin or race or racism.” That’s how I kind of gauge it, on both [racial] sides.

The social process of temporarily suspending his white colleague’s judgment about Lawrence as a person of color is triggered by his accumulated knowledge and experiences with whites. While knowledge of racism has been documented in other studies (Essed 1991), racial knowledge in the form of racial capital is different in two ways. First, it is not limited to knowledge of *racism*, and secondly, it also includes, by definition, knowledge of *two* racial worlds as an insider. Lawrence reports deploying racial capital “on both sides;” he explained, “I’m disruptive [in both communities], but I also belong here because I fit into both, kind of.” Lawrence’s ability to navigate racial boundaries with whites was echoed by another respondent who deployed racial capital to gain acceptance from his girlfriend’s father.

Rudy’s quote is referred to in the title of this article. Implicit in his statement about having an ‘in’ in both communities is an assertion about racial knowledge and experience to which biracials exclusively have access to. Rudy is typically perceived as “full black,” and while meeting his white girlfriend’s family, who were displeased that he was black, Rudy recalled how he generated an “in” for himself.

It was a pain in the ass at first because her parents were like “Oh you’re black, blah, blah.” But then I brought up “I’m half white, too.” Then, like, you can just get into a day-long conversation. [Her father said] “Oh, I didn’t expect that from you...who is white?” Then I can talk about my mom’s side, like, where she’s from. It just brings up a whole different range of topics that they’ll feel more *comfortable* talking to me about than if I was full black.

Rudy strategically mentions his white lineage to initiate a conversation with his girlfriend’s father, who immediately became more receptive to Rudy. Rudy’s interactional behavior supports Bonilla-Silva et al.’s (2004) concept of the *white habitus*, the racially



segregated racial socialization that whites experience which fosters skewed views about themselves in comparison to other racial groups, and shapes their attitudes and emotions. Rudy capitalizes on his knowledge of and experience with the white habitus by talking at length about his white ancestry. As a result of re-orienting the focus of the conversation to his whiteness, Rudy prompts his girlfriend's father to be more comfortable with him.

Saul shared a similar experience while explaining that when his white friends introduce him to new white peers, "They'll be talking about something they probably wouldn't expect me to know about, like Country music. I'll pop in and say 'Yeah, I just saw Kenny Chesney.' They'll be like 'Really? You?' And then we start talking more...and then we'll end up being friends" Saul elucidates that he understands the assumptions white peers have as well as how to navigate them. He adds, "I do it on purpose to let them know, things don't have to be awkward because I look black. You don't have to be nervous." The intimate familiarity with the white habitus or white racial frame (Picca and Feagin 2007) due to being an insider facilitated Lawrence, Rudy and Saul's ability to negotiate racial boundaries through racial capital despite their non-white appearance.

### *Deployment in the Black Community*

Vanessa explains how she reaped political advantages in high school by obtaining the "black vote;" and how her white boyfriend recruited her assistance in college while courting black voters.

[My boyfriend] even made a joke: "Oh, you're really good with black people." But it's true. He won't approach them. He's scared, he's intimidated. But, like, people are people to me and growing up in a city, I can act tough if I need to. I think that's, like, the mentality that goes along with interacting with the black community versus the white community. I have always, *always* been able to float from group to group. I won vice president during my sophomore year because I got the black vote [laughs].

Vanessa is often misunderstood as “all white;” hence, she is often not initially viewed as a racial insider to blacks. However, because she grew up in a predominately black community, she can relate to blacks and deploys racial capital to demonstrate that. She draws upon her racial worldview (Smedley 2007) to bond with black peers because she is aware that they will assume she is white. Vanessa maintains that being able to behave in racially specific ways (i.e. “tough”) in interactions with blacks establishes a connection. Although Vanessa’s understanding of black culture reflects racial stereotypes of blacks as more aggressive (Collins 2005), she demonstrates a similar level of internalized oppression as other African Americans that associate blackness with violence (Bryant 2011). Vanessa uses her accumulation of knowledge, experiences and meanings of blackness to counteract her white appearance and establish in-group status with fellow blacks, and in this case, to also gain political benefits.

William is also phenotypically white. He recalled how his ability to “connect with different types of kids” enhanced his job prospects as a coach at an inner city high school. William was able to comfortably interact and bond with his players—despite looking white—which is a key distinction that he believes has provided him with professional opportunities.

Sometimes I do feel out of my element if they’re not black people who I know. They kind of look at me like “You’re not black” at first but I feel like I can relate to a lot of different things, culturally—well, racially speaking—which in life has helped me. Especially social situations or with coaching. The group of kids who I coach now is completely different than the kids I coached back at home. For some people, that would be a [racial] barrier. They might be like “Well, I’m not really used to this.” But not me. When you’re in a position of power as the coach, you can’t seem like you’re uncomfortable.

William argues that his ability to “relate to a lot of different things, culturally—well, racially” has helped him socially and professionally since he was referred to his current coaching position through informal networks. When he encountered moments with black student athletes

who assumed that he is white, he was able to show them that he can relate to them by drawing upon racial resources. These racial resources are effective, despite William's white appearance, because "race is a unifying fiction that still resonates in black communities and gives unity to the experiences [rather than the phenotype] of many individuals" (Dyson 2009:246). A similar reaction has been documented about other white-looking biracials when interacting with the black community (Rockquemore 2005), although it was not referred to as racial capital.

Olivia, also phenotypically white, never met her black father and was raised by her white mother and white stepfather. She discusses how she deploys racial capital to make her white (half-) sister's black boyfriend feel comfortable when he accompanies her home from college because her parents are displeased about his racial background. Her sister Aubrey was present during the interview and also offered her opinion. "When Aubrey brings her boyfriend home, I say 'I'll come over, I'll be the [black] presence, you know.' I'm like the middle, go-between person." Aubrey added, "He *loves* to go to her house because he feels that comfort, he always says there is someone there for him to relate to...He's so self-conscious...but being with Olivia and my [black] uncle makes him a little more comfortable." Michael Eric Dyson argues that "[t]he relations of race have mostly to do with the conditions that foster or frustrate interactions between racial groups" (2009: 190); Olivia and Aubrey discuss how Olivia is able to foster positive interactions through a bond with blacks, despite racially looking white, which could frustrate interracial relations. Olivia further explained that she also relates to her black uncle, who married into her family. "We just have that immediate bond. I'm very comfortable with him because the whole family is white, and I know how some of them can be. Case in point, my grandmother would come over to the house for Thanksgiving, but she wouldn't talk to me." In these scenarios, Olivia is detailing how her shared knowledge and experience has shaped how

she connects with her sister's boyfriend and her uncle. The role of racial knowledge in negotiating boundaries during racialized social interactions has been analyzed in other studies, although the focus was on ethnicity, not race (Purkayastha 2005). As a result of these racial resources, Olivia has established a bond with her black uncle, and her home serves as a sanctuary for her sister's black boyfriend.

### *Dual Deployment: Racial Bonding through Language*

In addition to knowledge, experiences and meanings, respondents used language, or code-switching, as a racial resource. Code-switching, the enactment of diverse interactional methods that vary according to social setting (Hua 2008), has been examined in the African American community (Ray 2009) and other ethnic communities (Paris 2009), yet not in the bi/multiracial community. The participants in this study employed linguistic expression as a mechanism to establish a connection with whites and blacks. They report speaking "a little more properly around white people" and "probably more slang with black people," in the words of Alvin, who was raised by his white family. However, Alvin, along with several other respondents, refines this assertion by declaring "It's not like I talk that way *just* because they are black or white. It's more of a vibe thing." This "vibe" is a comfort level that participants were able to establish and/or detect due to having access to two racial worldviews, which include linguistic resources.

Madeline states "I kind of pick up how my friends talk. I do get a lil' *soul* in my voice around black people...I feel like if you can work the subtleties, you can bond with whomever." Similarly, Chase describes his experiences meeting new players on his track team:

I can usually tell the kids on the team who are from mostly black neighborhoods. Like, they speak slang so it's *abrasive* when they [talk to] white people because

the kids who grow up in white towns are not necessarily used to it. But I knew how to talk to white kids. I can just come up to them and talk normally... I think it's more of a comfort thing.

Dennis is a musician who just returned from a two-year residency in London and was raised by his black family. He explained why he adamantly refuses to bring some of his black friends to predominately white functions. In recalling a conversation with a black friend who wanted to accompany Dennis to a wine tasting, Dennis replied, "Nah, man, you can't come. You act weird and uncomfortable around white people. You be talkin' like 'nigga this' and 'nigga that.' White people don't like that, man. Make's 'em nervous. You can't talk like that around white people." Dennis is highlighting his black friend's *lack of racial capital* by asserting that he does not interact appropriately with whites through his actions and word choice.

Gabriella explicitly articulates how she expresses one idea in two ways:

I'm not bipolar, I see it as the most effective way to get the point across. To some people, I'll say 'He was handsome!' versus 'He fine as hell, girl!' It's, 'cause I know how to say it to them for them to understand it the way that I mean. And I think I'm the baddest [skilled, clever] because I can talk to this group and that group *in the same way* that they talk.

Notably, Gabriella begins this conversation with a disclaimer that is she not bipolar, which indicates that she understands how she may be viewed by deploying racial capital in the form of language. This disclaimer highlights the unique social and racial position that she holds by suggesting that her linguistic options are an uncommon practice. Also, Gabriella's explanation underscores a different grammar system as well as a different parlance to convey the same meaning. Paris notes how African American Language (AAL) omits the verb in addition to other sentence structure distinctions that represent "an act in linguistic identity" (2009: 434). Moreover, Ray (2009) contends that SAE is largely considered "proper" English; and it is overwhelmingly associated with "mainstream," (i.e. middle class whites) professionalism and

success (Delpit 2009). The differences in linguistic expression show how language operates as a component of racial capital, and is used to interact with and bond with whites and blacks. In these ways, biracials are managing or essentially working in and around racial boundaries by showing racial fluidity and how it is directly connected to their black/white biracial ancestry.

### *The Dimensions of Racial Capital*

The patterns that I have identified in this chapter are distinctive. At one level, my findings revealed patterns similar to Smedley's (2007) theoretical perspective of race as a worldview that structures one's experiences, cultural conditioning, interpretations and realities in addition to other racism scholar's arguments about the socio-historical grounding of the current experiences. At another level, my participants appeared to make use of Swidler's concept of a "tool kit," which consists of "symbols, stories, rituals and worldviews" that people uses to "organiz[e] experience and evaluat[e] reality (1986: 273, 284). In my study, we see biracials using a racialized "tool kit" that is unique precisely because it is twofold. In addition, considering the realities of "everyday racism" (Essed 1991), respondents access and draw from two worldviews (Smedley 2007) or cultural frames (Wilson 2009) *as an insider*, which is different from whites who live in predominately black communities or blacks who live in predominately white communities.

In exploring social, romantic, political and professional circumstances, it is clear that respondents draw upon four racial resources that enable them to contend with racial boundaries by guiding their interactions. Knowledge is a staple of cultural capital (Waquant 2004); and Smedley asserts that "'race' is a shorthand term for, as well as a symbol of, a 'knowledge system,' a way of knowing, of perceiving and of interpreting the world..." (2007:15).

Consequently, racial knowledge can operate as a racial resource that shapes how we interpret the world and how we interact as a result of our interpretations. Experience, a tenet of human capital (Michael 2004), is also central to racial capital because personal experiences heavily influence an individuals' concept of experiencing reality (Berger and Luckmann 1966); and in a racialized society, there are different realities that are contingent upon racialized experiences. Meanings also influence interactions; and having access to two racialized meaning systems is historically significant. President Obama states in his memoir, "As it was, I learned to slip back and forth between my black and white worlds, understanding that each possessed its own language and customs and *structures of meaning*, convinced that with a bit of translation on my part the two worlds would eventually cohere" (italics mine, 2004:82). Language, a cornerstone of cultural capital (Crossley 2001), can also signify linguistic cues of racial membership since "[i]n African American culture, personal expression orients to a sense of self that is grounded within one's community" (Ray 2009:68).

These resources are acquired through long-term, meaningful interactions with both racial communities *as an insider*, and are used to navigate largely segregated settings in school, at work, within families and when interacting with peers. Each resource, used singularly or collectively, shapes daily interactions with whites and blacks. Insider status generates an emotional and historical connection to both whites and blacks that conveys a level of intimacy that is difficult to establish across racial lines in the United States, particularly among both whites and blacks, due to the aforementioned violent history. This is noteworthy because racial capital was deployed in ways that trumped phenotype, gender and socio-economic status, although in some cases, it was mediated by region, generation and gender. Notably, because racial capital is an asset in two communities, it is not synonymous with racial (white) privilege.

These findings are sociologically significant because they show the continuing significance of racial boundaries in a population that is often celebrated as evidence of the disintegration of racial boundaries, or racial harmony. My respondents' stories decenter any figments of a "post-racial" or "color-blind" imagination by detailing how race is often front and center in a seemingly ordinary (and perhaps race-neutral) conversation about hobbies, family, college politics or professional opportunities.

### *Deployment Disadvantages and Debacles*

Although there is a shared racial experience among blacks (Essed 1991) and a white racial frame (Picca and Feagin 2007), the worldviews of whites and blacks are large in scope; and the ingredients that inform these cultural frames are to some extent, debatable. For example, political philosophy (West 1993), sexual orientation (Battle and Barnes 2010), gender (Lorde 1984) and class (Feagin and Sikes 1994) are merely a few areas that underscore intra-racial tensions and create different experiences which in turn, yield different worldviews. Therefore, racial capital is not immune to disadvantages and/or debacles because racial resources are not concrete or fixed. While disadvantages and debacles were not a dominant theme, they are worth exploring because they further complicate the concept of race by showing how racial resources are, to a certain degree, subjective, and consequently, they are mediated by region, gender, generation and other social markers.

The disadvantage of racial capital was unanimously conveyed as "getting caught in the act." Louie recalls an experience when he was working as a bouncer at a bar that was racially segregated by floors: "I walked downstairs [to the mostly black floor] and some guys were like 'What up, Louie?' And I'll be like 'Yo, what up, yo?' That's when you'll see the switch, but one



time Vince [white friend] was right behind me and...so...I've been *caught* doin' it. Vince goes 'What the hell was that!?' Louie characterized these experiences as "really embarrassing...humiliating because they don't understand." Eva reiterates this predicament when she deploys racial capital, "I'm always really conscious about it, I feel almost bad sometimes when someone sees it because they are like 'What's going on?' [laughs] Especially my boyfriend, he'll be like 'Who *are* you?'" Anita characterizes the feelings of exasperation and bewilderment that she experiences when she is in the company of both whites and blacks. "When both races are there, it's like 'Crap! What now?'" Her thoughts reveal not only the anxiety of "getting caught" but also the aftermath; how should she continue the social interaction? Which racial resources should she draw upon? How should she deal with this embarrassing, unexpected and chaotic encounter? The dilemma of 'getting caught' is a noteworthy disadvantage because it generates feelings of embarrassment and questions of authenticity that can jeopardize the bond that is established through racial capital.

Respondents also disclosed encounters when they did not negotiate racial boundaries, yet should have, or when they made an earnest, yet futile attempt to deploy racial capital. Jason explained how he learns from his peers when he is not effectively negotiating racial boundaries: "They point it out. Like, you may use a word when you're with your black friends that they don't know so they call you out on it. It's the same with your white friends. They'll be like [condescending tone] 'Why'd you say *that*?' They don't even say 'Can you explain that word?' They make you feel stupid, like, weird." Navigating two racial realms propagates perpetual criticism or shameful encouragement to interact in a specific way. Other respondents recalled abortive attempts at deploying racial capital. Fiona highlights the regional nuances of racial resources: "When I moved down South [from the Northeast], it was totally different. All of the

sudden, I had to pick a race, it didn't matter what I said or did. Just didn't matter." She went on to say that she did not interact in meaningful ways with whites in school or at work so she had little need to deploy racial capital since most of her social circle was comprised of blacks. Malcolm shared a gendered dimension of racial capital. "I didn't know how to give dap [gestural greeting] at the [urban] barbershop. I, like, messed it up a couple of times...the guys laughed at me." This gestural greeting was important because it structured subsequent social interactions; the men at the barbershop would continue to tease him if he "dapped" incorrectly, no matter what racial resources he strategically deployed to counteract his earlier interactional faux pas. However, if he "dapped" correctly, it was "a regular day at the barbershop." Malcolm felt an acute sense to learn how to "dap" because he is fair-skinned; most people assume he is white. Therefore, greeting his fellow racial minority males at the barbershop served a symbolic purpose and was deployed to trump his phenotype and establish insider status. These outcomes reveal the inevitable nuances in racial worldviews that participants learned to contend with, sometimes successfully and other times, not successfully.

*Social and Cultural Capital: To What Extent Do They Explain Racial Capital?*

Bourdieu introduced the term social capital, referring to the resources that can be acquired through social networks (Dika and Singh 2002); social capital facilitates the exchange of valuable information that otherwise would not be accessible in addition to having the potential to influence critical decisions, such as who is hired (Lin 1999). People with access to multiple, diverse networks are exposed to more information and can "consciously adapt to different situations and manage conflicting obligations" (Erikson 2003:15). Bourdieu argued that the "profits which accrue from membership in a group are the basis of the solidarity of which makes them possible" (quoted in Portes 1998:118). The benefits that derive from a group are a critical

component of what establishes the group *as* a group. This is particularly eminent when considering racial group membership, and thus, is useful in conceptualizing racial capital.

Embodied capital, part of cultural capital, requires a *habitus* in which an individual acquires and becomes conditioned to a form of knowledge that is expressed through the body, such as speaking (Erel 2010). Language, interactional competence, and how to effectively and appropriately communicate are characteristics of cultural capital (Crossley 2001). These characteristics have racial implications as various manifestations of institutional and cultural factors have produced pronounced distinctions in what has been referred to as Standard American English (SAE) (i.e. white, middle-class English) and African American English Vernacular (AAEV) or African American Language (AAL) (Paris 2009). The linguistic elements of cultural capital provide a framework within which racial capital can be foregrounded.

Derivatives of cultural capital include sexual and bodily capital. Sexual capital has been described as “accumulated sexual knowledge and skills” (Gonzalez-Lopez 2005:97). Similarly, bodily capital is “a symbolic currency often acquired by members of the dominated fractions of society, who deprived of other forms of social power, cultivate their bodies as value-producing investments” (Bernstein 2007:42). Wacquant articulates the process of acquiring bodily capital in boxing as “a sense of corporeal thrift acquired gradually through *long-term contact* with other athletes and coaches, workout after workout and fight after fight...” (italics mine, 2004:127). These iterations of cultural capital illuminate the many manifestations of advantage attainment in a series of domains from sex to sports. They lay a foundation that invites further intellectual insight on how society creates and organizes information and opportunities.

Overall, the concept of “racial capital” that I develop on the basis of my data overlaps with social and cultural capital. However, racial capital is still distinctive because of the institutional arrangements that are at the base of racial capital. Without the history of segregation and contemporary everyday racism that leads to the continuation of two separate racial worlds, “racial capital” would not be possible or necessary. Concurrently, the history and contemporary reality of racism make it imperative for my participants to acquire particular types of information from two worlds in order to live in, and be accepted by, both.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

In 1903, W. E. B. DuBois introduced the concept of “double consciousness” in which he argued African Americans possess a “double consciousness,” that of being “Negro” and that of being American. These two co-existing “consciousnesses” produced a “double life” for African Americans, complete with “double thoughts, double duties...and must give rise to double words and double ideals...” (DuBois 2005 [original 1903]: 195). Given the potential for a distinct type of socialization from two racial communities in the form of caregivers, I build on DuBois’ theory by arguing that biracial individuals have *intimate ties* to the white world and the black world, unlike African Americans (especially during DuBois’ time). Bi/multiracials have, in the words of Maria Root, “both feet in both [racial] groups” (Root 1992: xxi). Hence, biracials are socialized by white and black family members and by subsequent “thoughts,” “duties,” “words” and “ideals” of both communities, each with distinct worldviews or cultural frames. Armed with these worldviews, they are unique in that they have access to a repertoire of racial resources that help them navigate social interactions with whites and blacks.

These findings are significant because society is changing, yet with a critical lens, we can see that in some ways, it is also remaining the same. Socio-political changes, such as the rescinding of anti-miscegenation laws in 1967, have generated an increase in interracial unions (DaCosta 2004), an expanding bi/multiracial population (Shih and Sanchez 2009), a multiracial movement (Root 1992), changes in measuring racial populations in America (Williams 2008) and an absolute explosion in bi/multiracial research. While these changes are milestones and may warrant a critical racial juncture in the United States, this societal shift has not been seamless for those who have been most affected by these changes. In fact, racial identity scholarship identifies the struggles of confidently choosing or rejecting racial identities (Funderburg 1994; Kilson 2001; Leverette 2009; Renn 2004; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2008) and social psychological well-being research documents the social obstacles of fitting in, particularly in adolescence (Binning et al. 2009; Campbell 2009; Cheng and Lively 2009; Lusk 2010).

My findings reiterate the complicated racial realities of existing literature by showing that racial boundaries are not diminishing in the United States; and I build on these studies by identifying how racial boundaries are in fact being routinely and deliberately negotiated and reproduced by a subpopulation that is often assumed to be the embodiment of a racial panacea. In every chapter, I document how my respondents destabilize rampant “post-racial” rhetoric by detailing how race colors their everyday experiences. In this chapter, I focus on daily encounters with friends, partners, peers and supervisors about topics as mundane, and seemingly race-neutral, as work, college, dating and pastimes. This analysis can inform our understanding of how race operates not only in the larger society but also in groups that require resources that can accrue benefits. Given the resilience of racial ideologies and the subsequent tenacity of racial

boundaries, understanding that information is embedded in and preserved in specific racial communities that can generate opportunities is important. Additionally, understanding the exclusive positionality of black/white biracials illuminates the significance and implications of having access knowledge, experiences, meanings and languages in both black and white worlds.

Having intimate, emotional and familial ties to people of different racial backgrounds and subsequently different worldviews is distinct from other forms of capital. Although my study examines black/white biracials, I do not argue that racial capital is limited to a specific group; however, due to lingering racist ideologies, institutional arrangements and individual practices, racial capital is likely to be accumulated and deployed by people with parents of different racial backgrounds, including other bi/multiracials (i.e. black/Latino or white/Asian), because of the implications of kinship ties. While scholarship has explored the “strengths” of dual cultural heritage (Edwards and Pedrotti 2004), the appropriation of white racial symbols to denote biracial ancestry (Khanna 2010) and the “ethnic capital” of white British mothers of biracial children who engage in racially-conscious parenting strategies (Twine 2010), these scholars have yet to employ the term “racial capital” as a way to conceptualize how bi/multiracials negotiate racial boundaries through racial resources in everyday interactions with whites and blacks. Scholars who do examine everyday racialized experiences focus on monoracials, such as Essed’s influential *Understanding Everyday Racism: An Interdisciplinary Theory* (1991). Essed’s (1991) theoretical framework demonstrates the significance of systematically examining everyday encounters as a complex web of social relations that can inform us about how society is structured. I argue that my findings help us understand how race continues to function in an increasingly racially diverse and multiracial society, and particularly in the black/white biracial community. If the very population that is often cited as “evidence” that racial boundaries are

disintegrating deploys racial resources and consequently, preserves race as a social, yet salient, construction, how can we claim a “post-racial” or “colorblind” society? Lastly, using a capital framework allows us to explore race through worldviews that are racially bound, and the historical implications of accessing more than one racial worldview in a country an infamous racial past, supposedly “post-racial” present and increasingly bi/multiracial future.

## Chapter 6

### **“I’m a Different Kind of Biracial:” How Biracial Americans with Immigrant Parents Negotiate Race in the United States**

“I’m not, like, regular white so I’m not a regular biracial. I’m a different kind of biracial because I’m black and Danish...and I make that very clear to people.”

~Everett, 26 years old

In chapter five, I introduced the term “racial capital” as a way to conceptually capture the daily encounters and negotiations of black/white bi/multiracial Americans with whites and blacks. However, embedded in my concept of “racial capital” is an understanding of race that derives from access to two racial worldviews; that is, it assumes access to white Americans and black Americans on an intimate, meaningful, familial level. What about biracials who do not have ties to both the white American community *and* the black American community? In an effort to not marginalize or ignore the experiences of these persons, this chapter explores how bi/multiracial Americans’ experiences and interactions are tempered by ethnic ties and immigrant status. Additionally, by focusing on this subset I break away from homogenizing black and white individuals as African Americans and white Americans. Drawing on 17 of my 60 interviews, I call attention to the lesser studied, seemingly invisible bi/multiracial population: bi/multiracials with one or two immigrant parent(s). In doing so, I examine the dynamic interplay of race, ethnicity and immigration, and the unique angle it adds to being biracial in the United States. Few studies highlight the narratives of bi/multiracials with immigrant roots (Bean and Lee 2009; Funderburg 1994; Qian and Lichter 2011) and considering the mainstream rhetoric surrounding immigration, research about bi/multiracials with an immigrant background will enhance our understanding of what it means to be biracial in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a time period of not only an escalating bi/multiracial community but also unprecedented transnational migration and global interconnectivity.



My objectives in this chapter are threefold. First, I show how respondents struggle to articulate the meaning of race; they often associate it with culture at a considerably higher rate than their American-parent counterparts. I argue that this is a result of being racially socialized by one or two parents who themselves were not socialized (at least as children or teenagers) in the United States. Secondly, I document how respondents assert specific part racial/part ethnic identities by rejecting the racial label that is imposed on their immigrant parent. I contend that participants emphasize their ethnic roots not only as an attempt to more accurately describe their ancestry, but also as a means to circumvent the historical and stereotypical connotations of whiteness and blackness in the United States. Thirdly, I illustrate how interviewees demarcate the parameters of blackness, whiteness and immigrant status when they navigate largely racially segregated peer groups. I maintain that this finding is a result of respondents navigating an additional degree of difference when compared to their American-parent biracial counterparts. In essence, this chapter underscores how biracial Americans with immigrant ties—those who we might assume would have a limited understanding of race—voice clear understandings of racial superiority and inferiority, racial relations and racial stereotypes. The ultimate aim of this chapter is to develop a greater understanding of the complexity of experiences in the black/white biracial community and the diverse experiences of the children of immigrants as well as how these two groups overlap and interlock.

### *Immigrant Parent Sample Characteristics*

I did not initially plan to interview the children of immigrants. In the beginning of each interview, I asked respondents how old they were, where they were from and which parent was black and which was white. Seventeen of my respondents answered that question with a caveat by stating that “technically” their mother or father (or in a few cases, both parents) was/were

white or black but “really” they were \_\_\_\_\_ [specific ethnic background]. This distinction between immigrant biracials and American biracials did not end here; during my first immigrant-parent interview, different themes emerged that also emerged in subsequent interviews of respondents with strong ethnic ties. Of these 17 interviewees, 14 participants have one immigrant parent and three have two immigrant parents. The respondents in this chapter were between the ages of 20 and 30 years old; 8 were females and 9 were males. Eleven nationalities are represented in this chapter and further attest to the diversity of a study about race, ethnicity and immigrant ties. The home countries of participants’ parents include Antigua, Denmark, Egypt, England, Germany, Ghana, Ireland, Jamaica, Morocco, Scotland and St. Martin. Four of these nationalities/ethnicities are socially (i.e. in peer groups) and legally (e.g. according to the US Census) categorized as black (Antiguan, Ghanaian, Jamaican and St. Martin) and five are socially and legally categorized as white (Danish, English, German, Irish and Scottish). However, two nationalities/ethnicities (Egyptian and Moroccan) reflect the complicated reality of race in the United States because although these nationalities/ethnicities are categorized as white by the Census, the social classification is not as clear-cut. The complicated racialization process of categorizing North Africans in the United States has been documented in previous scholarship (Kusow 2006), and my respondents’ narratives reaffirm the racial obscurity of North Africans in the United States. As a result of this ethnic and racial classification diversity, I am able to analyze how immigrant status shapes the multiracial family dynamic through a kaleidoscope: I am able to explore how having a white immigrant parent shape the experiences of bi/multiracial children, how having a black immigrant parent impact the experiences of bi/multiracial children, how having a racially indistinct immigrant parent influences the

experiences of bi/multiracial children and how having both white and black immigrant parents color the experiences of bi/multiracial children.

*An Interesting Intersection: Bi/Multiracials and Immigrants*

In recent years, the “biracial baby boom” has exploded; in fact, scholars have noted that the bi/multiracial population represents the largest growing minority group in the United States (Bonam and Shih 2009). Among Americans who reported more than one race in the 2010 Census, the overwhelming majority, 92%, reported two racial backgrounds (U.S. Census 2010). The two most reported racial backgrounds, at 1.8 million, were black/African American and white (U.S. Census 2010). Similarly, the immigrant population is a growing area of public interest, political debates and scholarly significance. Due to immigration policy changes in the late 1960s, the immigrant population has increased exponentially (Bohn 2011). In 2010, there were approximately 40 million foreign-born residents, which constitute about 13% of the total United States population (U. S. Census 2010). The patterns of sending countries have shifted as well. In the 1960s, the majority of immigrants, 67%, came from European countries; by 2000, 54% of new arrivals were from Central or South America and European immigrants accounted for only 13% of immigrants (Bohn 2011). In 2010, 53% of the foreign-born population were from Latin America and the Caribbean (Caribbean immigrants comprise 9.3%), 28% were from Asia, 4% were from Africa and 12% were from Europe (U. S. Census 2010).

Identifying how these two groups intersect is vital to mapping the ever-changing racial and ethnic landscape of the United States. Immigrants often involuntarily endure an automatic racialization process upon migration to the United States which includes being arranged in a racial hierarchy that varies according to country of origin and phenotype (Lopez 2006). This

racial assignment heavily influences their access to resources and professional opportunities. For example, how they are perceived racially will impact whether or not they will be racially profiled, whether their citizenship will be questioned and whether or not they will be assumed to be (and treated as) criminals (Romero 2008). As mentioned in chapter five, considering that race operates as a “*fundamental* axis of social organization in the US,” (Omi and Winant 1994:13, *italics theirs*), it is worthwhile to explore how immigrants contend with their fundamentally new master status and how they communicate these understandings to their bi/multiracial children. While there is a wealth of research on white immigrants (Lieberson 1980; Roediger 2005; Steinberg 1981; Waters 1990) and black immigrants (Hall and Carter 2006; Hine-St. Hilaire 2008; Kasinitz et al. 2008; Waters 2001), no scholarship to my knowledge puts the experiences of bi/multiracial Americans who have at least one immigrant parent at the center of an analysis. Therefore, the relationship between immigrants, interracial coupling and multiracial families is a prime site of exploration to examine the growing bi/multiracial population from a new angle. In this chapter, I explore the boundaries and intersections of race, ethnicity and immigrant status by asking the following questions<sup>8</sup>:

- What does it mean to be biracial with one or two immigrant parents, considering these parents have not been racially socialized in the United States?
- What types of racial messages do immigrant-parent biracials receive from their parents, relatives, peers and the media?
- What role does ethnicity play in being bi/multiracial?
- How does a salient ethnic identity and strong immigrant ties influence the ability to navigate mostly white and black peer groups?

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<sup>8</sup> As mentioned in chapter two, different themes were explored in interviews with respondents who had one or two immigrant parents.

With the intention of answering these questions, I situate my findings from this chapter in previous research that analyzes similar themes that I explore, such as identity and peer group relations among bi/multiracials. However, the following section does not address how race is defined or conceptualized in the bi/multiracial community because it is my understanding that no study has posed this question. Additionally, I also contextualize my findings by including scholarship about the confluence of factors that shape immigrants' understandings of race, ethnicity and identity in the United States, and how those experiences are inherently linked to racialization processes.

*Bi/multiracial Studies: Identity, Well-Being and Family Socialization*

As discussed in previous chapters, literature in bi/multiracial studies focuses preponderantly on three themes: racial identity, social psychological well-being and racial socialization within the family. Even though mainstream race scholarship tends to emphasize racial binaries, scholars have found that bi/multiracial Americans' racial identity was not static; in fact, it was in flux and depended on a combination of individual, structural and contextual factors (Rockquemore and Brunsma 2008). These factors include family structure, socio-economic status, social networks, phenotype, neighborhood and community (Funderburg 1994; Kilson 2001; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2008; Renn 2004; Root 1996). Some bi/multiracials identify with one racial background, some identify with both racial backgrounds, some identify with no racial background by rejecting race as a concept to identify with altogether and still others identify with a different racial background depending on the social setting (Renn 2004; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2008). Bi/multiracials increasingly report racial self-identification patterns that deviate from the binary framework even if they appear phenotypically "black" (Khanna 2011), or phenotypically "white" (Funderburg 1994) and continue to complicate our

understandings of racial identities in the United States. I aim to add an additional layer to this identity literature by illuminating the role of ethnicity and immigrant ties, which will by default, further complicate the existing racial self-classification models.

Secondly, researchers have investigated the social psychological well-being of bi/multiracial persons, which is due to the social implications of having racial ancestry that is not compatible with a single racial category or community. These studies found high rates of social exclusion and marginalization in adolescent years (Bracey et al. 2004; Campbell and Eggerling-Boek 2006; Cheng and Lively 2009; Binning et al. 2009), although some studies document the advantages of being biracial, which include a unique cultural strength or asset (Edwards and Pedrotti 2004; Root 1994) and racially diverse peer groups (Quillian and Redd 2008). The majority of psychological well-being studies are quantitative and consequently, are less able to determine with richness and depth the social processes that shape social psychological conditions such as depression, self-deprecation and alienation (Cheng and Lively 2009) because they are limited by variables that can be tested and controlled for. In addition, many quantitative studies include a variety of racially mixed backgrounds (e.g. black/white, American Indian/white, Asian/black, etc.), whereas qualitative research tends to focus on one racial combination (i.e. black/white) which then allows for an explanation of the unique historical relations between two specific racial communities, and how these historical relations shape contemporary encounters and experiences.

The third and rapidly expanding domain of literature includes studies in which bi/multiracials' upbringing are examined (DaCosta 2007; Funderburg 1994; Samuels 2009; Socha and Diggs 1999; Twine 2010). These studies explore how white and black parents teach their children about race and whether not they inform their children about the social implications

of having black *and* white heritage in a country with an infamously segregated past. These studies also include the parents' perspective with explicit concerns of being judged by or exiled by their own family for engaging in an interracial partnership, and how these experiences shape their relationships with their partners and their bi/multiracial children (Frankenburg 1993; Harman 2009). Twine's (2010) research calls attention to the racial awareness (such as everyday racist encounters) and skills (such as braiding hair) that white parents develop while raising bi/multiracial children, although her study is about British mothers of bi/multiracial children. My goal is to contribute to this scholarship by documenting how an immigrant parent (or parents) influence(s) the dynamic of a multiracial family in the United States and subsequently, the bi/multiracial child's racial socialization. Specifically, I explore how—in the words of one of my respondents—a “non-traditional” (i.e. immigrant) biracial background presents different dimensions to being biracial that are worthy empirical inquiry.

*Immigration: Identity (Options), Ethnicity and Racialization*

While the perennial immigration debate in the mainstream media centers on policy, academic research examines immigration with more latitude including policy (Hirota 2013), assimilation (Foner 2012), inequality (Waters and Eschbach 1995) and the proliferation of transnational lifestyles through “real” and “virtual” means (Purkayastha 2010), all of which affect the lives of immigrants and their children. In her classic work, *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America*, Mary Waters (1990) argues that seemingly assimilated immigrants and post-immigrant generations of Italians, Irish and other formerly stigmatized groups choose to practice a flexible, “symbolic ethnicity.” “Symbolic ethnicity fulfills this particularly American need to be ‘from somewhere.’ Having an ethnic identity is something that makes you both special and simultaneously part of a community. It is something that comes to you involuntarily

through heredity, and at the same time it is a personal choice” (Waters 1990:150). Following Water’s work, several scholars have called attention to the fact that non-European origin groups that continue to be racialized— African Americans, Asian Americans and Latinos—have no such option (Kibria 2002; Purkayastha 2005), and the racial categories that are imposed on them, regardless of what ethnic identity they claim, do not make them “special.” On the contrary, they become a target for racial profiling (Romero 2008), casualties of the “war on drugs” (Armeline 2011), victims of the “war on terror” (Niels 2011) and other institutionalized racist practices that are dehumanizing (Dick 2011).

The structural and interactional processes of racialization sharply delineate whether immigrants and their children have ethnic options, or whether they are placed in ethnic binds as racism constrains their life choices and how they can claim their identities (Hine-St. Hilaire 2006; Purkayastha 2005; Waters 1994). Racism hinders their identity options so that in every interaction, their identities are constrained by the understandings of the people they interact with; this becomes particularly salient when those people are in positions of power, such as law enforcement officers (Romero 2008). Waters’ (1994) later work shows that Afro-Caribbean immigrants often emphasize their ethnic roots to immunize themselves from the racist ideologies that structure social interactions with African Americans. Nadia Kim (2008) argues that immigrants distance themselves from African Americans as a result of the global reach of the American media and the negative portrayals of African Americans. Pulitzer Prize winner Toni Morrison boldly reaffirms the propensity of immigrants to catapult their status and opportunities by severing any connection to African Americans in her 1993 *TIME Magazine* essay “On the Backs of Blacks:”



A hostile posture toward resident blacks must be struck at the Americanizing door before it will open. The public is asked to accept American blacks as the common denominator in each conflict between an immigrant and a job or between a wannabe and status. It hardly matters what complexities, contexts and misinformation accompany these conflicts. They can all be subsumed as the equation of brand X vs. blacks.

However, other scholars argue that black immigrants draw the distinction between themselves and African Americans because of their socialization; they come to the U.S. with “well formed, premigration nonracial identities” (Johnson 2008:92). Furthermore, Pierre (2008) contends that the scholarly emphasis on, and perhaps exaggeration of, ethnicity rather than race in discussing native and foreign blacks covertly reproduces racism because it relies on essentialist, stereotypical notions of black American culture as inferior. She argues that the emphasis on ethnicity disadvantages both groups because it does not take into account “the deeply political import of cultural differences,” nor does it challenge the racial order which continues to structure both groups’ opportunities (Pierre 2008:161). These contentions between immigrant ties, ethnic identity and racialization processes emerge in my respondents’ narratives; and I enhance this literature by underlining the complexity of being both the child of a black immigrant and biracial. By the same token, I build on Waters’ work by elucidating my respondents’ motivations for identifying with a white ethnicity that goes beyond symbolism or feeling “special.”

### **Data and Analysis**

Gedalof describes race, ethnicity and nation as “three notoriously slippery terms as culturally inscribed markers of difference and belonging that posit boundaries of community based on notions of shared origin” (1999:14). The “slipper[iness]” of race becomes most evident in the narratives of respondents with immigrant parents, which were distinctly different from

their American parent counterparts. Three major themes emerged in my interviews. First, respondents expressed difficulty in talking explicitly about race; they defaulted to ethnicity and culture at a much higher rate than biracials with two American parents. Secondly, immigrant parent participants were more inclined to reject the racial label that was ascribed to their immigrant parent. For example, they described themselves as “black and Danish” or “Ghanaian and white,” tenaciously differentiating such identities from “regular” or “traditional” black and white parentage, implying blacks and whites who have been in the U.S. for generations. This occurred for different reasons depending on whether their immigrant parent(s) was/were racialized as white or black. Thirdly, interviewees reported layered obstacles in fitting in with white peers if they had a white immigrant parent and black peers if they had an immigrant black parent. This social marginalization was most prevalent during their adolescent and college years. Respondents articulated an understanding that all bi/multiracial children endure varying levels of marginalization due to their racial hybridity, yet they believed that having an immigrant parent (or two immigrant parents) generated an additional degree of difference. As a result, they developed strategies to counter their amplified “otherness” or social distance through a variety of mechanisms. Essentially, they acquired the ability to traverse a highly racialized world with limited guidance from their immigrant parent(s) who was/were not socialized in the United States.

#### *What is Race?: Uncertainty, Confusion and Inconsistency*

When asked to explicitly define race, all respondents paused, stuttered and/or smiled like a student who is being asked a question that they know they *should* have the answer to, but they simply do not. What does race mean to you? How would you define race? When you think of race, what do you think of? These three inquiries were difficult questions for all participants to

answer, regardless of their parent's nation of origin. Interviewees were genuinely perplexed by these questions, which is interesting considering they were recruited under the premise that they have a white and a black parent, and hence, would be asked about their experiences regarding race. The majority of respondents initially began to answer with "That's hard..." and then would follow up with "skin color," "parents' background," "family history" and a series of other answers. However, immigrant-parent respondents rarely followed up with an explicit answer; they would remain pensive for several seconds and then offer definitions that were drenched in disclaimers of their lack of racial knowledge. For example, when asked to define race, Paula states

Well, that's hard because I try to think of it—I've gotten to the point where I try to think of it as such a non-issue that to define it...let me see. I guess race can be how you identify yourself and where you see yourself in your community and your family. It can maybe embody history, culture. Really, it can mean so much, but it depends on the person. I think that culture is one of the main things...and then you get into the whole debate of what is the difference between race and ethnicity, things like that. So, I guess, I would say it's more, like, people see it as biologically what you are, but I think when it comes down to it, it is more self-identity, what you see yourself as. But that's just me, my opinion.

Paula is a 21-year-old college student who grew up in a military household with an African American father and a Scottish mother; her parents met when her father was stationed in Scotland. Paula moved to the United States when she was 12 years old and has lived in Scotland (where she was born), Sicily and Spain. The fact that Paula defines race in largely cultural terms might seem fitting given her extensive experience with several cultures, yet another self-identified "military brat" defined race more confidently, even more defiantly. Delilah, a 26-year-old college student whose father was enlisted in the military until she was 14 years old and served in the military, defines race in clear-cut terms:

I think [race] is bullshit. I think it's bullshit. I am...this color because my father is the color he is and my mother is the color she is. And I act the way I act because of the situations I've been in and...this is...me [...] You know what? I'm *here*. I'm proof that it's *bullshit*...that it's all just thought-up and fabricated!

There are stark differences in Paula's definition and Delilah's definition, despite their similar military backgrounds. Paula's uncertainty in defining race is different from American parent interviewees who refrain from using language such as "I guess" and "maybe" when asked to define race. Robyn, who has a Jamaican father and a white American mother, also expressed difficulty in defining the concept of race. She becomes confused in trying to distinguish between race, ethnicity and nationality.

I don't know. Let me—I can't—I don't know, I guess I kind of group them together. When I think of nationality, I think where you were born. When I think of ethnicity, I think of...let me think...like where does your family originate from but I guess that also goes along with race. I guess race...ahhh! I don't know. I'll have to look that up [laughs]!

On the other hand, Rudy, who has two American parents, confidently defines race as "it's stupid, but it's just skin color, basically. Like the way we [as Americans] break up race, it's broken up by the color of your skin. So you're white, you're black, you're Hispanic, you're Asian. But [skin color] is, like, clearly the only difference between everyone besides the slightly different facial features." Brandon, who also has two American parents, confidently distinguishes between race and culture, "I would say that it is different from culture and that... the content of melanin in your skin is race, or how people see race, and also I think that it is sort of how you define yourself." Participants with two American parents were more direct and self-assured in their responses; they used phrases like "maybe," "I guess" and "that's just my opinion" like Paula to a substantially lesser degree and they drew distinctions more easily and coherently between race and culture and race and ethnicity like Brandon.

Samuel, 28 years old, was raised mostly by his mother and maternal grandmother. His narrative is unique in that he is the only respondent who reported a parent who is “passing” as white, and that parent is his mother. His mother reduces her African, Dutch, British and American Indian heritage to “white West Indian” when she is asked about her racial ancestry. Samuel’s maternal grandmother of African and Dutch lineage also “passes” for white and persuaded Samuel to do the same when he was a young child because he was lighter-skinned.

He defines race as:

Hmm...my working definition of race? I haven’t thought about it from my perspective because I’m trained to think of it from not only a social scientific perspective, but also a literary perspective and that changes historically. So um, I guess the way I look at it is that [sighs], we have these different categories—whether it’s white, black, Hispanic—that are rather arbitrary and it doesn’t really define a person. It is just a way of us cataloguing people to make...or *supposedly* to make our lives easier...and I guess—I guess the color of one’s skin is not something that we have control over. It’s—it’s what we’re born with, its...I guess that’s my working definition. It’s a way of cataloguing us, it’s a way of making us *seem* simple and easily defined when we are not.

Samuel, similar to Paula, repeatedly says “I guess” in defining race. He also stresses that his understanding has been shaped by education and profession. Although Samuel has lived in the United States since he was five years old, he repeatedly proclaimed throughout the interview that the way that race functions in American society is “bizarre.” It is probable that this perspective of race is influenced by his mother’s and grandmother’s West Indian influence as women who were raised in a country where they a member of the (racial) majority. The experiences of black immigrants raising their children in a country where they will be a (racial) minority, a drastically different experience than the black immigrants are familiar with, has been documented in other studies (Kusow 2006). Samuel also explains that his mother and grandmother’s upbringing included an acute awareness of skin color but no racial vocabulary or hierarchy, according to his experiences in their country of origin. Being raised by two caregivers

who were socialized in another country has unquestionably shaped—and complicated—his racial understandings, not only as the child of an immigrant, but as someone of a bi/multiracial background.

Other respondents convey obvious confusion regarding race, particularly those with black immigrant parents. When asked to define race, 24 years old Kaleb, replies “I think...[laughs]...it’s getting harder and harder to define it obviously, because of people like ourselves...Um, I don’t know what race is. I—I think there’s culture.” When I repeated “You don’t know what race is?” he replied, “Nope” and laughed. Kaleb’s father is from Ghana and his mother is white American from the Northeastern United States. Another participant with a black immigrant father expressed similar confusion. After replying, “Race? Um...I mean...I guess—I don’t know,” Elijah, a 22-year-old college graduate eventually defined race as:

I mean technically, I guess, you know, your ancestors from a part of the world...I—I don’t know, I think when most people think of race, they are thinking of, you know, skin color or, you know, some parts of the world, you know, Africa, Asia, Europe...but I see it differently. It doesn’t stick out to me as much as I think it might to other people, you know, like when I look at somebody, like their skin color isn’t the first thing that I think of. I’m not like “Okay, this guy is black, this guy is white.” Um, but, like, definitions of race, I think I still, you know, I rely on I guess um...yeah, I mean. I just—I *know* what race is but I can’t really expla—I don’t know.

Elijah’s father is from Egypt and his mother is a white New Englander. Elijah communicates inconsistency when he initially states what race “technically” means, but asserts that he understands it differently and then alludes to relying on this understanding of race before eventually giving up in minor exasperation. His inability to explain what race means indicates his lack of racial understandings that likely are a result of being socialized by an immigrant parent who has not had the same racial experiences as an American, specifically black

Americans. Elijah's words and frustration echo other immigrant parent respondents who convey uncertainty, confusion and inconsistencies in their racial understandings in contrast to their American parent counterparts who confidently communicate more clear and reasoned definitions of race.

*"I'm not Black...or White!:" Resisting Racial Labels and Clinging to Ethnic Markers*

After discussing racial definitions, respondents were probed about their racial self-identification and how their identity has shaped their experiences with family, peers, friends and significant others. The overwhelming majority of American-parent interviewees self-identified as "black and white" (or vice versa), "mixed," "biracial," "multiracial" and other terminology that indicates racial hybridity, such as "halfbreed" and "mulatto"<sup>9</sup>. In contrast, immigrant parent bi/multiracial used half racial/half ethnic terms to describe their racial self-identification. For example, Elijah identified as "white and Egyptian, but most Egyptian because that's the side that *shows* more. I don't really *feel* like I'm black. I mean, my father's Egyptian, he's from Egypt, so that is what I am." Other participants created their own racial identity vocabulary. Kaleb chuckled when I asked him how he self-identified, and replied "I like to use the term *Half-rican* American. It throws people off, and it's true. I'm half African, you know, Ghanaian, and half American, well, white."

Isabella is a 22-year-old mother-to-be who has an Italian-American mother and a Jamaican father and grew up in a predominately white, impoverished town. She was raised by her mother and spent very little time with her father in her formative years; although she grew up

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<sup>9</sup> I am acutely aware that these are derogatory terms; however, participants identified in these terms and I am committed to maintaining the linguistic integrity of their complex realities (Johnson-Bailey 2004).

near a city with a large Jamaican population. She shares how her racial identity has evolved over the years:

I think before I actually knew what race was, I would have told you that I see myself as white and black but I've come to the realization that you cannot *be* a color or *act* a color. That just doesn't make sense. I see myself as a human. I see myself as what I am, I'm Jamaican and I'm Italian and I'm both of those things fully and I love both cultures and I appreciate both cultures and that's really...it.

Other studies have characterized biracials who reject racial designations as adopting a “nonracial self-understanding...‘transcendent’ identity” where they claim to transcend racial categories (Rockquemore and Brunsma 2008:49). However, these studies do not mention how ethnic roots and immigrant ties shape or might facilitate a non-racial identity. Respondents often mentioned their ethnic background as a marker of pride; they were proud that they were knowledgeable about their historical lineage and their cultural traditions. In addition, they were often confused about why they would be associated with an inaccurate pan-ethnic category (e.g. African American); some respondents were frankly annoyed when people imposed these categories onto them. Simone, a sophisticated 20-year-old college student, is one of the respondents who has two immigrant parents. She lived in Jamaica with her German father until she was nine; then she moved to the United States to live with her Jamaican mother. She explains why she becomes irritated when people incorrectly label her as “African American.”

I have done work to get a specific history of my family so I hate this thing that you do here [in the U.S.] when you say African-American. I really find it so strange. I'm an American citizen now so why do you<sup>10</sup> have to split me into these definite categories? I'm American, why the hyphen? Why do you call me African-American or black? I mean, of course, everybody's ancestry comes from Africa but my direct family members come from Jamaica *and* Germany so if anything I should be called Jamaican-German or German-Jamaican, what does Africa have to do with it?

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<sup>10</sup> She is using the plural form of the word “you,” meaning Americans in general, not the researcher.



Henry, who never met his Italian father, identifies as “Jamaican and Italian” and decided to major in Italian language in college as a means to feel more connected to his Italian lineage. He states “My mother is from the West Indies so I picked up the dialect, the food, the culture,” yet Henry discusses his struggles with fitting in with black peers growing up in the Northeast in a suburban middle school and an inner-city high school. “Most of the black kids acted up in high school. They were disrespectful to their teachers, they didn’t really care to be there. There were a lot of fights, so much more violence than my [suburban] middle school. I thought to myself ‘Oh my gosh, is *this* what acting black is?’ If it is, I don’t want to be black.” This one-dimensional understanding of blackness as exclusively violent and therefore, undesirable is noteworthy considering Vanessa’s characterization of blackness as “tough” and manageable in the last chapter. She doesn’t equate toughness with undesirable but instead uses her knowledge about blacks as a way to relate and interact with them. Vanessa was raised by two American parents and Henry was raised by one black immigrant parent. Vanessa uses “racial capital” to navigate black peer networks, and is proud of how her background facilitates the ability to bond with blacks while Henry avoided blacks and did not want to be associated with them.

Both Kaleb and Elijah’s fathers informed both of them repeatedly that they were not “African American” to dissuade them from associating themselves with the negative stereotypes that plague the African American community. These stereotypes include laziness, lack of educational values and poor work ethic (Picca and Feagin 2007). Kaleb and Elijah both grew up in predominately white neighborhoods and therefore, had limited experience with the African American community and thus, were unable to challenge or support their fathers’ rationale with any anecdotal evidence. On the contrary, Travis, who grew up on the West Coast and was raised mostly by his white American mother, reminisces about the uplifting messages of being black in

his youth. “I was raised by a community of revolutionaries, artists, and other free thinking people who understood what myself and other children [of color] were going to deal with. So they armed us with Black pride, internationalist solidarity, and emphasis on one’s own intellectual and artistic creativity.” This contrast of racial rearing is particularly striking considering that Travis’ white mother was a single parent, yet black history and pride was instilled in him despite the absence of an African American parent figure. The racially loaded stereotypes that structured Kaleb’s and Elijah’s black immigrant fathers’ understanding of American blacks foreground the following section in which respondents learn to negotiate race among two racial groups, one of which they may not identify with.

### *Negotiating Race, Ethnicity and Peer Acceptance*

Navigating peer groups during adolescence is a challenging time period for most bi/multiracial individuals (Binning et al. 2009; Funderburg 1994) and the children of immigrants (Portes 1996). However, it proved to be difficult for additional reasons for respondents with immigrant parents particularly if their immigrant parent was racially categorized as black. Moreover, if the respondent was assumed to be black or African American instead of appearing white or racially ambiguous, her/his encounters with the black community were contentious. She/he had a difficult time being accepted by this group when she/he rejected the racial/ethnic label black/African American not on account of hostility towards African Americans (or in an effort to distance themselves from blacks due to global racist stereotypes), but as a means to accurately and proudly proclaim their ancestry. Many African American peers misinterpreted this rejection of blackness as an articulation of black as “bad,” which is not unreasonable logic considering that black stereotypes are doused in negativity. In fact, Picca and Feagin (2007) note

that laziness, hyper-sexuality and lack of educational goals are three of the most prominent stereotypes of African Americans that pervade the American pathos.

In the last chapter, I discussed how Rudy, a respondent with two American parents, describes being mixed as advantageous because biracials have an “in” with each racial community because each parent shares their histories and worldviews, which provides the biracial child with negotiation skills that serve well in both communities. The immigrant-parent counterparts did not express the same level of advantage (or “in”) in each racial community, which suggests differences in racial socialization patterns between immigrant parent and American parents. Participants with at least one immigrant parent verbalized the difference between their upbringing and their American-parent counterparts. Their tenuous relationship with whiteness or blackness (depending on which race the immigrant parent was categorized as) influenced how they learned to negotiate race with underdeveloped or stunted “racial capital.”

#### African-ness vs. Blackness, Caribbean-ness vs. Blackness

Simone, one of two respondents who has two immigrant parents, recollects that she was largely unaccepted by blacks, and was mostly accepted by white peers under the premise that she ignored her blackness while in the presence of white peers.

The black kids in high school used to say things like “You don’t really act black, you don’t really act like us.” And because there is only a limited amount of serious discussion that you are going to have in high school, I just sort of...I tried to explain that it is an injustice that they were limiting themselves to a certain type of behavior. They just got angry and ostracized me. And I remember my white friends one time talking about how disproportionate black women’s bodies were and I said “Hello,” meaning there is a black woman in the car with you right now! And they just said, “Simone, you’re not black!”

Simone’s experiences with whites and blacks illuminate the almost parallel universe that she inhabits as someone who spent her formative years in another country, Jamaica, and

continues to spend summers there. Simone's experience corresponds with the experiences of African or Afro-Caribbean immigrants because she was socialized in a completely different socio-cultural context in which she was a member of the majority group, similar to black immigrants who come from Africa or the Caribbean. In other words, she was *Jamaican* in Jamaica; she was not considered a racial minority or a person of color in a predominately white country. Hence, she was not relegated to hyphenated citizenship as African-Americans (or other racial minorities) are in America. Fanon characterizes this dynamic in *Black Skin, White Masks*, when he declares that "[t]he black man is unaware of [race] as long as he lives among his own people; but at the first white gaze, he feels the weight of his melanin" (1952:128).

Consequently, it is clear for bi/multiracial respondents, having an immigrant parent who is classified as black, carries a different set of experiences than having an African American parent who was socialized as a racial "other" in their nation of birth. Although race meanings are community-specific, and can therefore carry different meanings in different communities (Chun 2011), the meaning of blackness was not conflated, or communicated as similar to African-ness or Caribbean-ness in my respondents' narratives.

#### European-ness vs. Whiteness

Respondents with European parentage emphasized the different meanings of whiteness vs. European-ness in both white and black social circles. Everett, who is a 26-year-old recently minted Ph.D., grew up in the southern United States after spending his formative years on military bases in the United States and in Europe. He is also the respondent who is quoted in the title of this chapter. He has a Danish mother and African American father, and explains why he felt compelled to make this distinction known to his peers, particularly if they were black. In an effort to draw a key distinction between connotations of whiteness and his Danish roots, Everett

implicitly juxtaposes the different racial histories of Dane/black American relations and white Americans/black American relations.

My mother is Danish, she isn't white. Growing up...you know, I wasn't *ashamed*, but it was embarrassing to have a white mother growing up in an African American community [in the South]. It was a bit taboo. Still to this day, some of my friends will joke about that but I correct them because it's *very important* to me to say that my mother is *Danish American* because people in Denmark are not racist towards African Americans. So I am proud to be Danish.

Similar findings have been documented in one of the handful of studies that address immigrant background in the bi/multiracial community. Funderburg's (2004) *Black, White Other: Biracial Americans Talk about Race and Identity*. Funderburg's (2004:358) respondent asserts "Sometimes I'll make it a point to say my mother's not just white. Get that: My mother is white, but she's Danish and guess what, I speak Danish..." However, Funderburg's respondent does not make the reference to historical relations that Everett mentions. On the contrary, she emphasizes the added layer of uniqueness that accompanies Danish origin while my participant Everett underscores the historical meaning of whiteness and the association with racism, terror and unequal power relations that is common knowledge in the African American community. Everett voiced that Southern blacks harbor animosity toward whites due to the history of race relations in the United States, especially in the southern states; hence, he navigates this racial minefield by exonerating himself from any anti-white sentiment, which facilitates a level of acceptance in the black community. Through these means, Everett is able to negotiate peer networks among black peers.

### **Conclusion and Discussion**

Both race and immigration are shaped by power relations, and racial status and immigrant status can largely determine one's access to resources and quality of life. Thus, centering the

experiences of black/white biracial Americans with one or two immigrant parents enriches the literature on both bi/multiracials and immigration by highlighting the understudied intersection of mixed-race and migration. Carbado and Harris assert that “[r]acial projects connect an interpretation of race in a given historical moment or context to the organization of social structures and everyday practices” (2012:183). My hope is that this chapter challenges us to think about how the escalating bi/multiracial, bi/multi-ethnic American population are creating a new historical moment in our current context that will change social structures and everyday practices, but only if we pay attention with a critical eye.

In this chapter, I have found that like bi/ multiracials with two American parents, this subset of participants used their bi/multiracial location to paradoxically distance themselves from a particular racial category while simultaneously re-inscribing racial stereotypes. My respondents question race as a concept that most Americans take for granted by rejecting racial designations in a nation that is, and has been for the majority of its history, highly racialized. The 17 participants interviewees explored in this chapter assert a distinct half racial/half ethnic identity that arguably challenges the racial binary on two levels: first, by proclaiming more than one background and secondly, by thinking outside of the racial box and declaring ethnic ancestry. The difference between biracials with an immigrant parent and biracials with American parents is that they emphasized ethnicity in ways that helped them distance themselves from the existing racial hierarchies, but such distancing—and the explanations they provided—show their implicit awareness of racial hierarchies. Anthropologist Audrey Smedley asserts that “[i]n whatever context race comes to play, it conveys the meaning of non-transcendable social distance” (2007:21). Through these narratives, we see that these respondents are, in part, using ethnicity as a way to opt out of race and all that it implies or forecasts. At the very least, they are

attempting to negotiate racial boundaries on terms that make sense to them. Their assertions of ethnicity remind us about ethnic amalgams that are part of what people tend to think of as homogenous African American and white categories. As their life stories unfold, their self-identification and concentration on their ethnic background suggest a new pattern that has not yet been explored in the field of bi/multiracial studies. This finding is noteworthy given the increase in interracial and interethnic marriages and the subsequent surge in bi/multiracial and bi/multiethnic children.

Similar to previous chapters, the implications of these findings suggest that race continues to convey salient meanings of worth, morality, intelligence, work ethic and educational attainment. It is clear that the children of immigrants are internalizing similar messages of racial superiority and inferiority to a degree that compels them to disengage from at least one racial background and that racial background is the race that would correspond with their immigrant parent. Significantly, this finding was not limited to respondents with black immigrant parents; those with white immigrant parents were equally reluctant to self-identify with being white, despite the privileges that accompany white racial status. Participants' rejections of racial categories were intimately connected to the brutal history of black/white race relations in the United States, and the residual racist stereotypes. My analysis is particularly pertinent considering that the rising bi/multiracial population is often cited as evidence of blurring racial boundaries, the end of racism and hence, the end of enduring racist stereotypes. Conversely, my chapter supports other critical race studies but does so within a different population by demonstrating that racial boundaries remain fortified and racist assumptions and stereotypes are painfully present. This is evident as respondents go out of their way to preclude an association

with a racial community that is associated with dominance, oppression and terrorism (white) or laziness, hypersexuality and criminality (black).



## Chapter 7

### **“They See Me as Exotic...That Intrigues Them:” Gender, Sexuality and the Racially Ambiguous Body**

So far of the five [white] partners I’ve had, they’ve—they’ve seen me as *exotic* and, um, that intrigues them.

~Frederick, 28 years old

In the last chapter, I attempted to deepen our understanding of what it means to be biracial in the 21<sup>st</sup> century United States by centering the experiences of my respondents with at least one immigrant parent. Devoting one chapter to this subgroup, I hope, will help to expand our social imagination of what blackness and whiteness mean, how these terms intersect in nuanced ways for immigrant-parent biracials and how these social constructions are navigated differently and even vehemently vetoed by the children of immigrants. Continuing with the theme of intersections, this chapter incorporates an intersectional lens by exploring race, gender and sexuality. I contribute to intersectional literature by developing an analysis that demonstrates how hybridity presents an opportunity to enhance and perhaps re-orient intersectional research. I explain how gender and sexuality are shaped not just by race, which assumes singularity, but by *two racial backgrounds* that have historically and contemporarily been constructed as polar opposites. Hence, this chapter highlights the distinct, layered intersection of gender, sexuality and race in a population that disrupts racial categories, and therefore transforms how the categories of gender, sexuality and race interlock. With the intention of producing a colorful portrait of my respondents’ experiences, I round out my dissertation with an intimate look at how being black *and* white impacts my respondents’ dating and romantic encounters.

I have three main objectives for this final data and analysis chapter. Similar to chapter 6, I classify a subgroup of 22 participants as “racially ambiguous” and elucidate how these

participants are considered “exotic” by romantic interests by virtue of both their body and their racial ancestries. I assert that my interviewees internalize racial and gendered ideologies that are couched in “exotic” language because they view such terminology as compliment, and do not realize how it is inherently rooted in ideologies that rationalize inferiority and justify inequality. In addition, I show how being characterized as “exotic” shapes which racial group(s) participants prefer to date and tend to date. I maintain that this finding is in part shaped by the communities they reside in but also stems from racial and gender ideologies that are encased with expectations, assumptions and status that is acquired through particular romantic partners. Lastly, I examine the nuanced dynamic of how being described as “exotic” shapes my interviewees’ most intimate experiences with regard to sexual excitement, sexual expectations and specific sexual encounters. I argue that this finding most strikingly highlights how stereotypical meanings of blackness and whiteness operate like a pendulum in their romantic life, and shapes how respondents experience a fundamental aspect of humanity: emotional and sexual intimacy.

#### *Racially Ambiguous Sample Characteristics*

As I mentioned in chapter six, when I began my master’s project, I had no intention of developing a subcategory of participants. As part of my semi-structured interview, I asked respondents “What do most strangers think you are, racially?” and “How do you think you look, racially?” As my data collection progressed, it became clear that a considerable number of respondents reported a spectrum of racial designations, and this spectrum influenced how they experienced romance, dating and intimacy. I operationalize the term “racially ambiguous” to indicate respondents who reported the most variation in strangers’ speculations of their racial background. The 22 respondents who I classify as “racially ambiguous” represent the most

variation in strangers' speculations of their racial background(s). They are assumed to be a multiplicity of racial backgrounds, including at least three of the government-recognized racial classifications: white/Caucasian, black/African American, Hispanic/Latino/a, Asian/Asian American and American Indian. Many respondents reported being assumed to be more than one racial background and/or being assumed to be different racial backgrounds according to the people who they were around (friends, family, peers, etc.). Participants in this subset were between the ages of 19 and 30 years old; 12 were women and 10 were men. Three identified as gay (two men and one woman) and the remaining 19 identified as heterosexual. Although the number of sexual minorities is relatively low, few bi/multiracial studies include gay or bisexual interviewees. In doing so, I aim to cast a wider net than existing literature and offer a textured analysis that is more representative of the bi/multiracial community. Approximately two-thirds of these interviewees were born and raised in the Northeastern United States; however, three respondents grew up on the West coast, one in the Midwest, one in the South, one in the Southwest and one respondent spent formative years on both East and West coasts.

*Intersectionality, In-betweenness and "Exoticism"*

In her renowned essay, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," Audre Lorde insisted on carving out a literary space for her multi-dimensional identity as a black lesbian feminist poet. She explains why as scholars we should not be afraid to acknowledge our differences: in fact, doing so is vital and will benefit everyone.

Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged...Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference—those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older—know that survival *is not an academic skill*. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make

them strengths. *For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.* They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change (italics hers, 1984:112).

In this essay, Lorde asserts that if we fail to pay attention to the interlocking categories of gender, race, sexuality, class and age, our feminist analysis is “weaken[ed]” for the simple fact that we will be leaving groups of people—and their significant lived realities—out of the academic discourse. Therefore, intersectionality has become essential to feminist studies over the last two decades and is perhaps the equivalent of a quantum leap in social science as it has introduced significant theoretical, epistemological and methodological frameworks by allowing for a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of inequality (Anzaldua 1987; Crenshaw 1991; Essed 1991; Zinn and Dill 1994). Crenshaw’s (1991) term “intersectionality” has only become increasingly relevant as scholars build on, critique and strengthen their predecessors’ intersectional lenses through ground-breaking research (Alexeyeff 2009; Asencio 1999; Bulbeck 1998; Mohamram 1999; Narayan and Purkayastha 2009; Purkayastha 2010; Vidal-Ortiz 2009; Wright 2003). In addition, there are an increasing number of scholars who use intersectional lenses although not explicitly (Bourgois 1999; Venkatesh 2008; Wacquant 2004), perhaps because initially, intersectional works included women and these studies concentrate on men.

Influenced by the work of Purkayastha (2010) and Collins (2002), I aim to integrate even more complexity (i.e. the duality of single status categories) as an intersectional scholar and to usher in studies about groups that have historically been subsumed under imprecise categories (e.g. biracials being constructed as black). A handful of studies have explored how race and other social categories interact and intersect for bi/multiracial Americans and notably, these studies concentrate on women (Roberts-Clark et al. 2004; Root 1996; Root 2004; Stanley 2004; Streeter 1996; Twine 1996). The majority of this research, in addition to Allman’s 1996

“(Un)Natural Boundaries: Mixed Race, Gender and Sexuality” was conducted almost twenty years ago and the racial, gender and sexuality landscape has shifted significantly in the past two decades. Moreover, there is a dearth of research that examines race, gender and sexuality *simultaneously* in the black/white bi/multiracial community and few studies, if any, isolate the *body* as the center of analysis. Thus, I pose questions that underscore the unique ways that these three categories intertwine, and that call attention to the relationship between in-betweenness and exoticism:

- How does racial ambiguity affect the intimate lives of gay and straight bi/multiracial women and men?
- How are their bodies racially categorized by romantic pursuers? How do they know how their intimate partners categorize them?
- How does their racially mixed background influence or interact, if at all, with their racially ambiguous body in romantic experiences?
- What are the dating and romantic preferences and patterns of biracials?
- What social and structural factors shape these preferences and patterns?

Answering these questions require a greater understanding of the term “exotic” and the historical penchant for impregnating this term with racial, gendered and sexualized implications. As a framework for the significance of my findings, I also reference theoretical characterizations of race, gender and sexuality as a means to demonstrate the hierarchical minefield that my respondents learn to romantically navigate. These three concentric circles of power represent hegemonic ideologies that are inescapable, even in the darkness and privacy of a bedroom. These ideologies, which ultimately rank humans according to specific traits, shape an intimate

act that bonds the overwhelming majority of the human population through erotic and embodied pleasures, “thoughts, inclinations, habits, sensations, and opinions” (Foucault 1978:31).

### *The Meaning of Exotic*

Webster dictionary defines the term “exotic” as “of foreign origin or character,” “strikingly unusual or strange in effect or appearance,” and “of, pertaining to, or involving strip teasing” (Webster, 1996, p. 679). In sum, by popular dictionary definition, this word is associated with difference, appearance and sexual connotations. My participants’ interviews reflect these three meanings; their stories are riddled with romantic pursuers’ preoccupation with their atypical racial backgrounds, habitual comments about their unusual physical features and racially-inspired (or phenotypically-inspired) sexual excitement. While there is a strong correlation between physical attraction and sexual desires for most people (Eastwick et al. 2011), I analyze how this connection for my respondents is linked to racial ideologies that carry distinct meanings about gender and sexuality. For example, I document how respondents come to understand themselves as “exotic” that is due, in most cases, to *both* and their phenotype and their racial backgrounds. Consequently, this type of exoticism is different from the “primitive,” [racial] “Other” (hooks 2000) or “the sexually exotic and permissive” caricatures of Black women (Essed 1991:31) that are assigned to one racial, and inferior, heritage. Contrarily, “exotic,” in my participants’ cases, is contingent upon the perceived malleability of racial classification that enigmatically encompasses both racially inferior and superior ancestries. Further, this type of exoticism is characterized by the paradoxical intersection of blackness and whiteness as hypersexual and chaste, and the intimate interest that derives from how that contradiction will be embodied and experienced (Zackodnick 2001).

### *Race, Gender and Sexuality*

Race “is a social structure, constructed through social interaction and manifested in the institutions of society, interpersonal interactions, and the minds and identities of those living in racially based social orders” (Anderson 1996:ix). Gender is an organizing principle that has been used to challenge biological notions of sex and to conceptually explore “socially created meanings, relationships and identities organized around reproductive differences” (Glenn 1999:5). Sexuality is the expression of erotic desires and emotions that are shaped by structural conditions, cultural scripts and historical arrangements (Weeks 1986). Foucault famously outlined the historical construction of sexuality and identified the role of power in the public discourses surrounding sexuality:

Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the *name* that can be given the historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power (italics mine, 1978:105-6).

Inextricable from each other, race, gender and sexuality shape power relations and are embedded with notions of inferiority and superiority. Also, these categories mediate one another and as a result, race “can shape and reshape what gender and sexuality can mean” (Valentine 2007:18). Thus, sexuality, gender and race intersect to form a highly organized arrangement of personal, intellectual, moral, physical and emotional characteristics that have implications for interpersonal relations and romantic intimacy.

### *Race and Language: Code Words*

Social constructions would not exist without the language that is used to create and reinforce them. The language used to discuss race has been described by linguistics scholars and

anthropologists as complicated, powerful and revealing (Dick & Wirtz 2011). Language itself “is capable of becoming the objective repository of vast accumulations of meaning and experience, which it can then preserve in time and transmit to following generations” (Berger and Luckmann 1966:36). Because language constructs our sense of reality, it follows that racial language constructs our racial reality/ies. Historically, the language that has been used to refer to bi/multiracial Americans is “half-breed,” “mongrel” and “tragic mulatto” (Ferber 1998; Smedley 2007). This language associates people with animals, questioning the very *humanity* of biracial persons, which is a common theme in racist ideologies. According to Bonilla-Silva, the dominant racial ideology in a post-Civil Rights era is a colorblind ideology and it is characterized by language that is “slippery, apparently contradictory and subtle” (2002:42). Although many white Americans have become well-versed in how to talk about race in public or multicultural settings (Picca and Feagin 2008), they often shift the conversation to colorblindness as “proof” that they are not racist (Bonilla-Silva 2010). However, colorblind rhetoric is dangerous because it harvests a rich breeding ground for covert racism that appears racially neutral while it disproportionately devastates communities of color through life-altering, unjust institutional treatment (Alexander 2010). Adhering to a colorblind ideology creates a false sense of racial reality that is paradoxical. Williams (1997:9) argues that

Race is treated as though it were some sort of genetic leprosy or a biological train wreck. Those who privilege themselves as Un-raced—usually but not always those who are white—are always anxiously maintaining that it doesn’t matter, even though they are quite busy feeling pity, no less, and thankful to God for their great good luck in having been spared so intolerable an affliction.

Colorblind ideology also generates new ways of talking about race that essentially operates as racial code words, or words that are infused with racial assumptions, such as “ghetto” or “prep” (Chun 2011). Similarly, “criminal” is often associated with African Americans (Alexander



2010), just as “illegal alien” is frequently linked to Hispanics, specifically those of Mexican heritage (Dick and Wirtz 2011). These code words are part of a racialized discourse that functions covertly and relies on denying explicit racial references through implicit racial assumptions that effectively reproduce racist stereotypes. This discourse jeopardizes our ability to have a critical, historically accurate conversation about racial inequality and systematic, generational disadvantages (Dirk and Wirtz 2011). The prominence of colorblind ideology is prevalent in my respondents’ intimate experiences; the term “exotic,” while not an explicit racial term, is entrenched with assumptions about race, gender and sexuality that impact how they experience dating, romance and intimacy.

### **Data and Analysis**

The subtitle of this chapter is gender, sexuality and the racially ambiguous body. I used the word “body” intentionally to call attention to a site of extreme social significance. The body is how we determine what race, gender and sexual orientation we *think* someone is and therefore, has strong implications for how they will be treated. The body as a reference point implies phenotype, but my analysis is not limited to phenotype as it also includes bodily adornments (i.e. hair styles, tattoos, etc.) and stereotypes about (racialized) body types. Phenotype, or physical features that have become racialized, such as skin color, hair texture and eye color, classify people into racial categories that are infused with assumptions and stereotypes that guide thoughts, emotions and behavior (Bonilla-Silva et al. 2004). Bodies are not only racialized by phenotypes; they are racialized by features such as curves<sup>11</sup> or voluptuousness (Schooler 2008), strength (Collins 2005), body size (Bogle 1993). People whose phenotype or body type elude

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<sup>11</sup> As an example, one of my respondents said “Like, I’ve always been so upset about having a big butt and everyone is like ‘You’re black, you’re supposed to have a big butt.’”

racial classification challenge clear-cut racial boundaries and hence, disrupt corresponding understandings about gender and sexuality. In the following sections, I show how respondents internalize the “exotic” message they repeatedly receive from partners and potential intimate mates. I also examine participants’ racial dating preferences and patterns. Lastly, I discuss how being characterized as “exotic” shapes the sexual excitement and expectations of respondents’ partners and therefore, influences their sexual encounters, or lack thereof.

*Internalizing Ideologies: Compliments or Code Words?*

When asked if there were any advantages or disadvantages of being black and white, several respondents mentioned, among other comments, looking attractive, distinct or unique. This theme emerged with both male and female respondents and gay and straight respondents, and this response was not limited to respondents who were coded as racially ambiguous. However, racially ambiguous participants were often specifically characterized by their romantic interests as “exotic;” and they were significantly more likely to internalize to this description, and the implications associated with this term. Notably, in most cases, respondents referred to themselves as “exotic” based not only on their phenotype but also their racial heritage. In tandem, their body and their background generated an understanding about gender, sexuality and romantic prospects.

Frederick is a 28-year-old lively, cultured student who is often assumed to be “mulatto,” Egyptian, Italian, Lebanese, Puerto Rican or Dominican. He discussed how his choice in male partners is guided by his “exotic” appearance.

All of my partners have been white. This is not to say that I haven’t dated Spanish guys or black guys. I *have* but it seems my attraction is more to white men...But I think I’m just more likely attracted to white men because they are *different* from me. And I don’t want to be with someone for the rest of my life

who has a similar background as I do because I feel like it's too similar, we have nothing to talk about...So far of the five [white] partners I've had, they've—they've seen me as *exotic* and, um, that intrigues them.

Frederick proceeded to explain that non-white men do not view him as exotic and in fact, his light skin complexion is “disruptive” in such communities. For example, when dating a Jamaican man, Frederick was not invited to meet his partner's parents because Frederick was “so light-skinned, *too* light-skinned.” When he was a child, Frederick was teased in the black community because of his “good hair” and “light skin,” features that are often associated with the white community and white standards of beauty (Patton 2006). Frederick's romantic choices have been shaped—and limited—by the way his body is interpreted and this interpretation is drenched in racial ideologies. Black men have perceived him as “too light” compared to their phenotype; however, white men view his features as “exotic” and therefore, intriguing. Ironically, Frederick views white men as more different from him despite the fact that he is often assumed to be of a European background more frequently than he is assumed to be of African heritage. Therefore, his own internalized racialized views of himself influence who he is attracted to and which men he will pursue romantically.

Dennis is a 25-year-old musical artist who grew up in New England and is one of the most travelled participants in this study. He has travelled across the U. S. for three years to perform; he was enlisted in the U.S. military for four years and he lived in England for two years. Having travelled around the world, strangers' speculations of his racial background(s) depend on the country, state, community and social context. Dennis describes how these interactions typically unfold:

It's mostly females, a lot of guys won't come up to you and be like “What are you?” A lot of females say “What are you?” I'm like “I'm a *person*.” You know? And they are like “Well, no, what is your racial background?” And I go, “Well,

I'm black, Cuban and Italian." Then ears raise and eyebrows go berserk and the ladies are like "You're so gorgeous" and I'm like "Thank you, I think? I don't know what you're aiming for...[laughs] when you said that but, thank you, it means a lot."

Dennis' experience demonstrates that it is not simply his racially ambiguous body that yields comments such as "you're so gorgeous," but it is after he discloses his racial and ethnic ancestry that women express visible interest (i.e. "ears raise and eyebrows go berserk") and flattery ensues. Dennis fails to critique how these women exoticize his body in concert with his racial and ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, he is uncritically accepting the idea (or the "compliment") that he is "exotic," which is another example of the prominence of colorblind ideology because while "exotic" is not an explicitly racial term, it conveys ideas about difference that are grounded in race. Furthermore, gender and sexuality are apparent in these interactions considering that Dennis is heterosexual and only women declare that he is "gorgeous." Dennis internalizes how women interpret his body and his background based on ideologies of race, gender and sexuality; in fact he uses it as an opportunity to potentially facilitate intimate endeavors.

Madeline is a 24-year-old entrepreneur; she was born and raised in the Northeast. She has been asked if she is Filipino, Jewish, Middle Eastern, Puerto Rican and Brazilian. Like Dennis, she is assumed to share the perceived backgrounds of the people she is around. Also, similar to Dennis, she articulates how her background and her phenotype create romantic advantages for her with black men:

[Black] guys tend to want to date Spanish or mixed or some kind of ethnic women. They don't want a black girl; they don't want a white girl. They want something in between. And it comes to just how women are: white women go tanning to look like us, black women straighten their hair to look like us. A lot of black dudes don't wanna wife [marry] a white girl. They'll mess around with her and date her, but won't bring her home...because they'll never be like us. They'll never have black *in* them. No matter what they are, they can't be mixed or be ethnic, they're just not! They're plain white [laughs]! Then the black women kind of get angry because typically we are preferred over them. I know it sounds bad but...true.

In this richly forthright quote, Madeline interprets her body, and all “Spanish or mixed or some kind of ethnic women,” as more highly regarded by black men. This is evident in her declaration that white women and black women make attempts to look racially ambiguous by tanning their skin and/or straightening their hair. Although this statement is laden with uncritical and problematic assumptions yet, her message is clear: her racial ambiguity, gender and sexuality intersect to generate intimate opportunities that she claims are unavailable to non-racially ambiguous women. This finding is interesting for three reasons. Madeline is adhering to Western beauty standards by positioning herself as higher on the beauty hierarchy than black women, which has been found in other bi/multiracial literature (Funderburg 1994) and studies about light skin privilege and hair length in the black community (Russell, Wilson and Hall 1992). However, Madeline is also challenging Western beauty ideals by asserting that she is higher on the beauty hierarchy than white women. Lastly, Madeline, following racial ideology logic, paints one group with a broad brush by proclaiming that “black women straighten their hair to look like us” while she was sitting across from a biracial woman interviewer with undeniably curly hair. Madeline’s assertions demonstrate how she internalizes the ideologies that construct her as exotic. Her and other interviewees view this coded language as a compliment and it shapes how they perceive their romantic possibilities and in some cases, how they perceive others’ intimate prospects.

### *Dating Preferences and Patterns*

Respondents candidly discussed how appearing racially mysterious or “exotic” sways their choice of romantic partners. Over half of my racially ambiguous respondents (12) did not have a specific racial dating preference, yet their dating patterns leaned toward one racial background. In most cases, this was simply due to community racial composition; and in other

cases, it was a result of who tended to express romantic interest in them. The 10 participants who did have preferences preferred to date whites (4), blacks (3), bi/multiracials, Latinos or other racially ambiguous people (3) and their dating patterns reflected this preference. These participants' preferences and patterns typically reflected the types of communities they were raised in. The words interviewees choose to articulate their dating preferences and patterns are reminiscent of the previous section; this section indicates that they not only internalize ideologies about themselves but also about others, and this is intricately connected to who they are inclined to pursue when dating. I deliberately chose respondents who date racially ambiguous partners to show how their racial ambiguity shaped their dating experiences.

William, 23 years old, grew up in the Midwest and attends graduate school in the Northeast. He characterizes himself as: "because I appear to be—I'm not, like, darker so most people can't tell [that he is a person of color] and if they can, they might think I'm, like, Hispanic but they don't really think that I'm black." He also adds that sometimes in the winter, people assume he is "straight up white." William has never dated or "been with" a black woman and has dated one white woman. He predominately dates Latinas, and notably, he did not know that his girlfriend was white when they met.

...the funny thing is I thought my girlfriend was mixed when I met her because her natural skin color is darker than mine, she's tan. I think I played it by association, I met her at my friend's house, who is Filipino and Puerto Rican. There were a bunch of, like, black people and mixed people and the way that she did her hair...I just thought she was mixed. Come to find out, she's Polish, not colored at all [laughs]! So I don't know if my opinion of her was biased but...I thought she was mixed.

William's racial assumption about his white girlfriend, based on her complexion, hair style and by the racial composition of the house party, is worth mentioning and is echoed by other respondents. However, it is interesting that William is black and white yet mostly dates Latinas

because although interracial dating is increasing, there are often informal social sanctions that discourage crossing racial borders (Kreager 2008). This prompts the question, how much is *William's* phenotype not only shaping who is attracted to him, but also who he is attracted to? Because he grew up in a diverse town, it is evident that he has lived in the same community as women of other racial backgrounds. His only reference to his racial dating pattern was “physique-wise, I guess I go for more curvy women, I guess that’s why I never dated a white woman because their figures are different.” This statement is not only essentialist with regard to women of different racial backgrounds’ bodies but inaccurate because William did date a white woman; he still does, in fact.

Dennis, who was mentioned earlier, explains how he interprets the female body in racialized, gendered and heterosexist terms and how his interpretation influences which women he will engage in a serious relationship with.

Someone who is dark-complected—an African American woman—she’s real in your business. [Imitating a woman’s voice] “Who’s ringing your phone? Where you goin’? Who you been wit’?” She’s always in your shit. White chicks...way too clingy, always needy, gotta be up under you. And I’ve noticed that light-skinned women or biracial women—olive-complected women—for some reason, they give you a *great* balance of the two. Like when they need attention, they find a way to get it but when they don’t want to be bothered, they go on their shit, they never ask too many questions. I have a problem with too many questions because I feel like I’m going through the Spanish Inquisition! Biracial girls know how to even shit out and I think that’s because they have a good mixture of *evenness within them*.

Dennis explains heterosexual black women and white women’s behaviors based on their race or what he assumes to be their race due to their phenotype. In essence, he interprets the female body as an indicator of personality traits and predictable behavior in potential partnerships. Dennis concludes that monoracial white and black women are not desirable to him; he prefers racially mixed women or Latinas, or women who appear to be racially mixed or

Latina, with one exception. He recalled temporarily dating a white woman who he found attractive because she had “a sleeve of tattoos, that was an exotic point about her. She had more tattoos than me!” Dennis expressed that this differentiated her from “your plain Jane Barbie white girl.” This “plain Jane Barbie white girl” statement is also essentialist, yet his description of his former white girlfriend who he viewed as “exotic” based solely on having several tattoos contradicts his earlier comments about how he determines which women he will be compatible with based on racial background and subsequent assumptions about behavior. Dennis’ dating experiences provide an intimate portrait of the dating decision-making process and it is inextricable from hegemonic ideologies.

The dating trend of preferring other racially ambiguous or “exotic” mates is not limited to heterosexual romance. Henry is a 22-year-old college student who states “society identifies me as a person of color, usually Hispanic, but sometimes that ‘color’ changes.” His dating preferences mirror these heritages.

I’m neutral, I guess. I like in between colors. It’s awkward, like, I’ve never really been attracted to black men...and white men, I always felt like I was way too colored for them so I couldn’t make any connections with them. I’ve just always dated Hispanic men, like, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans and actually it’s funny because the guy I was in a two year relationship with was Cape Verdean and German so he was biracial. The guy before him, his mother was from Thailand and his father was African American so the men I’ve dated have either been biracial or Hispanic but never, like, black or white.

Henry’s statement “I’m neutral, I guess. I like in between colors” says it all; he prefers to not date monoracial white and monoracial black men which only leaves racial groups that are traditionally considered racially “in-between,” such as Latinos and Asian Americans (O’Brien 2008). Notably, no racially ambiguous respondent reported dating monoracial Asian Americans.



Anita is 25-year-old graduate student and mother who is assumed to be many ethnic backgrounds: “I have gotten everything, *everything!* Dominican, Indian, Italian, Guinean. I’ve gotten places I’ve never heard of before!” She explains her dating trends, “I usually lean towards white. My son’s father is Puerto Rican but I think that has a lot to do with the fact that I look Puerto Rican so I kind of tried to identify with it for a while because it was easier. People liked it so I was just kinda like ‘Okay, I’ll go with that.’” Anita’s dating experiences are complex in that she mostly dates white men, a background she is often not associated with (with the exception of Italian); however, she did date a Puerto Rican man precisely because she “tried to identify with it” because people assume she is Puerto Rican. Anita’s mate selection at one point in her dating history, and ultimately, her child’s racial and ethnic background, was shaped by her phenotype and how she was racially and ethnically perceived. It was ultimately easier to navigate a social and sexual landscape throughout her teenage years where she acted in line with others’ assumptions regarding her racial and ethnic ancestry (to the degree that she learned Spanish) than it would be for her to routinely identify her non-Puerto Rican lineage.

*Exoticism and Intimacy: Racialized Bodies in the Bedroom*

Racial ambiguity has implications for intimate desires, expectations and experiences because of sexual scripts that are informed by ideologies of race, gender and sexuality. Notably, racially ambiguous respondents were significantly more likely to explicitly discuss sexual encounters during our interview. While I asked all respondents the broad question: “Tell me about your dating experiences,” only participants who I code as racially ambiguous referred to specific sexual experiences or other detailed intimate accounts (i.e. “We just kissed” or “I’ve only hooked up with white guys”), although not all racially ambiguous respondents made these comments. Consequently, interviewee’s bodies and background, two factors they have no

control over, had an impact on their most intimate encounters. Participants became cognizant of what their racial ambiguity signified to their partners with respect to initial romantic interest, sexual excitement and sexual expectations.

Dennis conveys how his phenotype limits his opportunities to engage in casual dating or casual sexual intercourse with women. In doing so, he demarcates the distinct difference between him and his black (or darker-skinned) male counterparts. Additionally, Dennis' quote underscores how exoticism facilitates certain sexual, or reproductive, expectations that affect his sexual endeavors.

Dennis: Mixed men get the shitty end of the stick. We get no love because every woman in the world—'cause of that black man perception...that a black man is gonna lay that lovin' down [be a satisfying sexual partner].

Chandra: What about your curly hair? You were tellin' me before that girls like that. Doesn't that make you attractive, like, sexually attractive?

Dennis: No, that makes me a baby-making machine. I'm not a recreational sex guy [laughs]...I'm for procreation purposes only [laughs]! Not for fun, not because we want to get wild and crazy!

Dennis understands his dating prospects from an intersectional lens that includes race, gender and sexuality. He staunchly claims that darker-skinned men have an advantage in “recreational sex” acts because they are assumed by “every woman in the world” to be a satisfying sexual partner. In this remark, Dennis is proclaiming the desires of women universally, which not only assumes universal, or compulsory, heterosexuality but also relies on long-held racist stereotypes that interpret the black male body as hypersexual (Collins 2005; Frankenburg 1993). Notably, men of discernable African descent are perceived solely as sexual champions as opposed to persons with a variety of intimacy aptitudes, including emotional intimacy (Beeman, 2007). According to Dennis, his body—light-skin complexion with curly hair—is interpreted entirely differently than darker-skinned men, which has gendered and sexualized implications for his

love life. He argues that his body is desired not for mere (or “causal”) sexual satisfaction but for genetic (i.e. racial/phenotypic) purposes that will presumably produce attractive progeny. This assumption also springs from a level of exoticism because it ignores the elements of Dennis’ personhood and reduces him to his penis as a site of supreme concentration precisely because it will produce a phenotypically “attractive” child.

Rachel is a 19-year-old college student who spent significant amounts of time on both East and West coasts. Strangers often speculate that she is “Brazilian, Egyptian, any form of Spanish” and she candidly admits to being “insecure about not being able to pull off being half black” because she is so fair-skinned. In fact, she frequents the tanning salon during winter because she “gets too pale.” When asked about dating, she discussed several encounters that revolved around her hairstyle. The racial implications of her hair design created a level of sexual excitement for her white boyfriend.

Having my straight hair keeps me in a neutral [racial] zone because I have dark skin [compared to whites] but I have straight, white girl hair so...[My ex-boyfriend] told me once that he really liked my braids because he had never hooked up with a black girl before. I was like “You weirdo!” [laughs] But, like, he looked at me as a *black* girl, like, something *different*. He grew up in Minnesota. They have, like, four black people in the entire state, so...It’s just weird how people perceive you, even people you’re closest to.

Rachel’s story illustrates how her exotic body and altered hair style sexually stimulated her former boyfriend and guided his comments and behaviors while “hooking up.” Rachel’s ex-boyfriend’s desire is likely rooted in gendered, racialized and sexualized desire that emerges from racist ideologies about “exotic” black women (Nagel 2003), although black/white women represent a nuanced exotic black women since they are half white. The “mulatto” female body during slavery presented a different dynamic of exoticism than black female bodies due to the paradoxical embodiment of chastity and hypersexuality simultaneously (Zackodnick 2001).

Thus, part of Rachel's former boyfriends' sexual enthusiasm regarding intimacy with a black woman might hinge on the fact that it will not last. Rachel's racial classification operates much like a pendulum that swings back and forth between white and black depending on her hair style. Rachel's former boyfriend can experience sexual endeavors with a black-coded body once (or even a few times) and then he returns to interpreting her body as white. In other words, the ability to be intimate with someone who seems to alternate racial categories—that are embedded with assumptions about gender and sexuality—may well be where the novelty lies.

Dennis and Rachel highlight how exoticism operates in the bedroom in different ways for heterosexual men and heterosexual women who are labeled as “exotic.” Notably, none of my gay-identifying respondents explicitly referenced sexual encounters with respect to being “exoticized.” In Dennis' case, being “exotic,” although it constructs him as “gorgeous,” does not translate to casual intimate encounters; in fact, his appearance hinders “recreational” sexual intercourse, which he was interested in engaging in at that point in his life. Also, Dennis did not draw distinctions between women of diverse racial backgrounds, he claimed that “every woman in the world” held a bias about black men being sexually pleasing. On the other hand, Rachel's narrative demonstrates how being “exotic” makes her more sexually appealing to her white male partner and she does not extend her boyfriends' sexual excitement to other men, of any race. Consequently, these intimate accounts underscore the nuances of exoticism by illuminating how the term “exotic” carries different meanings with regard to sexual interest, experience and encounters. These meaningful caveats are shaped not only by someone's body and racial background(s), but also their gender and sexual orientation.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

In an iconic intersectional text, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldua introduced herself as a “border woman” who learned to navigate the Texas-U.S. Southwest/Mexican border. She narrates “It’s not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions” (2007:19). The dynamic of being a “border” person and embodying contradictions, although in a different form, is a growing reality for many Americans. Bi/multiracial scholars have estimated that by the year 2050, one in five Americans will identify with more than one racial category (Cheng and Powell 2007). In addition, considering the escalating Latino population, we will likely see a rise in the number of people who are perceived as “racially ambiguous” or “exotic.” Why does this matter? The racial discourses that are used to discuss race tell us about the larger racial climate and power relations (Dick and Wirtz 2011). Moreover, colorblind discourses rooted in colorblind ideology cloud our understanding of race relations and racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva 2010). Therefore, this chapter can help us recognize how colorblind ideology penetrates the most intimate aspect of the lives of the largest mixed-race demographic in the U.S.: black/white biracials (U.S. Census 2010). At 1.8 million, this group is an appropriate starting point for exploring colorblind ideology, particularly since this group embodies both ends of the racial hierarchy.

In this chapter, I examine racially ambiguous black/white biracial Americans’ romantic lives with an intersectional lens. Concentrating on intimacy illuminates how gender and sexuality interact with racial ambiguity in a complicated, sometimes paradoxical way. Racially ambiguous respondents’ romantic lives are heavily shaped by racist ideologies; in fact these ideologies structured countless social interactions and sexual encounters. My findings weave together the experiences of women and men who identify as gay and straight and who date and are romantically pursued by people from a variety of racial backgrounds. This chapter

demonstrates three main themes. Participants, regardless of gender and sexual orientation, internalize being described as “exotic” and articulated their body and background as intriguing, attractive and unique. Secondly, I outline how being labeled as “exotic” impacts respondents’ romantic preferences and patterns with respect to race. Thirdly, I identify how being “exotic” influences interviewees’ most intimate dating experiences via sexual interest, expectations and encounters. Existing research that centers racial ambiguity, gender and exoticism explores biracials outside of the United States (Haritaworn 2009). My findings contribute to the growing intersectional literature by illuminating the cross-cutting nature of race(s), gender and sexuality in the United States within a population that, based on the racial hierarchy, embodies conflicting ideas about gender and sexuality. Some literature has addressed race, gender and dating in the biracial community (Rockquemore 2002; Streeter 1996); I build on these studies by bringing sexuality into the discussion, which is heavily under-studied in bi/multiracial studies. Body and embodiment scholars have elucidated how daily experiences are shaped by how the body is perceived via gender (Chambers 2007) and race (Rooks 2001). I add to these studies by showing how racially ambiguous bodies are interpreted as “exotic” and by addressing the implications of this description for their intimate lives. I also contribute to the scholarship on race and language by identifying the implications of a seemingly racially neutral term that is encoded with ideologies about race, gender and sexuality. Ultimately, this final data and analysis chapter shows how these omnipresent hegemonic ideologies operate paradoxically, or perhaps “intriguingly,” on a racially ambiguous body. In sum, these experiences draw attention to power. As Foucault argues “[p]ower is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (1977:93).

The intimate stories shared in this chapter may function as a microcosm through which we can envision how all bodies are interpreted racially and then acted upon with ideas about gender and sexuality. Participants' dating memories serve as a rich roadmap to how race is being discussed in an allegedly "post-racial" era; and it provides insight of future discourses as the concept of race changes, yet paradoxically stays the same, as shown in all chapters of my dissertation. In conclusion, it is necessary to recognize how omnipresent hegemonic ideologies are used to transpose race, gender and sexuality onto the body, even on bodies that appear to evade racial classification and corresponding assumptions regarding gender and sexuality. Future research should explore the intimate comments and encounters of other bi/multiracial groups while keeping a critical eye and ear for the real-life implications of racist, sexist and heterosexist stereotypes that are couched in seemingly complimentary, "exotic" language.

## Chapter 8

### Conclusion, Implications and Suggestions

Racial identity doesn't mean anything to me because like I said before, I'm a person. I identify equally with all of these different types of people from all of these different realms. I don't have a racial identity, Dr. Martin Luther King had a dream and I'm it!"

~Dennis, 25 years old

"In regard to race, we are living, as it's been said, in the United States of Amnesia" argues Michael Eric Dyson (2009:196). We live in a nation with an ignorant general public when it comes to matters of racial history, racial oppression and residual racist ideologies. However, the concept of race influences every Americans' life, whether they are privileged or oppressed by race, as well as the lives of immigrants who are racially categorized upon their arrival. Race is an ideological illusion; it has been constructed through social, economic, political, philosophical and scientific means over the course of four centuries. However, the fact that it has been constructed does not make it any less powerful. As philosopher Cornel West asserts "Categories are constructed. Scars and bruises are felt with human bodies, some of which end up in coffins. Death is not a construct. And so, when we're talking about constructs having concrete consequences that produce scars and bruises, these consequences are not constructed, they are felt. They're very real" (1997:485). If we are so fortunate to circumvent scars and bruises, racist ideology still has a severe impact on our human potential as it "legitimizes the squandering and dissipation of an important *surplus* of societal resources and human talents" (italics theirs, Feagin, Vera and Batur 2001:7). Thus, racism continues to operate as a cultural crucible in American society; it shapes how we will experience the human condition in a fundamental way.

In this study, I showed how my respondents are no different from other Americans (and immigrants in this country), in the sense that race has colored how they experience life in the



United States. However, with regard to their dual racial ancestries, they are different from monoracial Americans because they have “both feet in both [racial] groups” as Maria Root argues (1996: xxi). In this dissertation, I identified the social, familial, political, romantic and professional implications of having both feet planted in both white and black worlds. Through analyzing the life stories of 60 women and men, I developed a more comprehensive and personal account of what it means to be black and white not only in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but in a purportedly “post-racial” epoch. I examined how their family relationships develop, how they interact with whites and blacks on a daily basis, how they negotiate race concurrently with ethnicity and immigrant status, as well as how they experience dating, romance and intimacy. These are stepping stones for uncovering their complex, nuanced and layered racial realities. I showed that black/white biracials uniquely *embody* a power paradox; they symbolize both oppression and privilege by virtue of their parentage. Therefore, their exclusive racial position in a highly racialized society logically engenders a distinctive social position.

This study has drawn upon the earlier work on bi/multiracial Americans. Racial identity has served as the nucleus of bi/multiracial research for over two decades, followed by studies of social psychological well-being. However, these studies have mostly focused on the micro-level of being biracial and do not show how historical institutional arrangements have created a unique racial and social location for biracial Americans. While pertinent, these studies are also limited in that they do not reflect the scope of bi/multiracial Americans’ experiences in the United States. As Dennis forthrightly argues, “Racial identity doesn’t mean anything to me” yet he goes on to declare “Dr. Martin Luther King had a dream and I’m it!” This quote accentuates the relevance of going beyond identity to understand what it means to be biracial, regardless of how one identifies.

On the other hand, research that does discuss a wider range of bi/multiracial experiences addresses a different racial climate than the contemporary context that younger generations of bi/multiracials face (Funderburg 1994; Root 1992; Root 1996). In a post-2000 Census “check all that apply” American society, terminology like “biracial,” “multiracial,” and “mixed-race” are more common and more accepted. In an Obama era, phrases like “post-racial” have resurfaced and shaped the racial discourse, however uncritical. In a Facebook, YouTube and online dating age, mixed-race groups, bi/multiracial video diaries and spoken word skits and interracial dating websites can be accessed with the tap of a few buttons. Hence, my respondents have been socialized in an entirely different racial universe than Root’s and Funderburg’s respondents, although some of my findings overlap with their highly influential and prominent scholarship.

In this dissertation, I centered the experiences of black/white biracials by looking precisely at how these biracial participants experience family, interactions, and intimacy illuminate their distinct social and racial location. Some of my findings emphasize patterns similar to those described in monoracial studies. For example, in my third chapter “Made in America: Interracial Sexuality and Bi/multiracial Children,” I draw parallels between anti-miscegenation legislation (and residual social taboos) and the experiences of stigmatization and marginalization that bi/multiracial children have endured historically and currently. Associating interracial sexual relations with rape, incest, disloyalty, danger, and tragedy are deeply intertwined with racist ideology. Furthermore, framing interracial sex as a threat to society and inherently devoid of emotion and love are strong indicators of how the offspring from these unions will be interpreted and treated. Monoracial research increasingly documents the discrimination experienced by interracial couples, yet it is rarely ideologically linked to the experiences of bi/multiracial children. Similarly, the growing body of knowledge about the

bi/multiracial community seldom highlights the corresponding experiences of racial hostility that interracial couples confront, and how this treatment is indelibly linked to racial boundary maintenance. Even well-respected race scholars reproduce anti-miscegenation rhetoric by characterizing white women/black man interracial relationships as inherently sexualized (Nagel 2003) or privileging their monoracial perspective over the lived experiences of the growing number of multiracial researchers (Collins 2005).

My study also focuses on the relationships within families. Influenced by the racism and gender scholars who demonstrate that dynamics and interactions within families intersect in important ways with ideologies and institutional arrangements, I address these intersections in chapter four. Through “Race and Resemblance: Exploring Relationships in Multiracial Families,” I paint a family portrait of family relationships in multiracial families through the pained and joyous voices of my participants. While most family research on biracials looks at racially conscious parenting strategies (Twine 2010) or less racially aware parents (Samuels 2009), I uncover what being biracial in public with an unorthodox family looks like and feels like. I describe how respondents remember their parent’s reactions to racially motivated, socially stigmatizing incidents that profoundly affected their lives. I disclose how sisters and brothers exasperatingly explain to friends and strangers that they “really” are related, that they “really” are family. I weave together these experiences to capture how looking “racially” different from a parent or a sibling impacts how family relationships develop, how respondents relate to or bond with their relatives and ultimately, how they characterize their kinship ties. This chapter is significant because existing research does not examine how all of these angles shape family relationships and the family dynamic as a whole.

In an effort to develop a systematic analysis of what it means to be biracial in everyday social encounters, I introduce the term “racial capital” in chapter five. I showed how my participants brought their racial capital—i.e. the amalgam of knowledge, experiences, meaning and language—to bear on daily interactions with whites and blacks. I documented the circumstances under which respondents deploy racial capital, the outcomes of deployment and process through which they acquire these racial resources. As a researcher, I stepped outside of the identity and well-being box to cultivate an understanding of how intimate access to two historically segregated realms has social, professional, romantic and political dividends. I identified how the racial domains between blacks and whites are embedded with worldviews or cultural frames that remain largely inaccessible to racial outsiders due to the powerful history of racism in this country. This chapter elucidates how and why information remains racially bounded which decreases the likelihood of non-black/white biracials developing and deploying racial capital. These findings also explicitly illuminate what being biracial signifies in social interactions by showing how respondents use agency to position themselves accordingly while engaging with whites and blacks. I welcome scholars to critique, build on and complicate racial capital by examining the racial resources in other groups, or by drawing connections between racial capital and other iterations of capital.

The main objective of this dissertation has been to acknowledge complexity and nuances, especially considering the long history of subsuming biracials under the homogenous black umbrella category. Staying true to this intention, I do not obscure the experiences of my immigrant-parent respondents. I dedicated chapter six to examining what being biracial means to someone with a parent who was not raised in this country. Through outlining how my respondents articulated racial understandings that are shaped by friends, family and the media, I

underscored the caveats of being biracial with an immigrant parent. By analyzing their identity assertions, I broadened our conceptualization of identity by refusing to ignore the role of ethnicity and immigrant ties in the lives of my respondents. In explaining interactions with peers, I illustrate how being biracial with an immigrant parent erects an additional layer of negotiating with white and black peers. I also explain how being (half) black is delineated from being (half) African or Afro-Caribbean and how being (half) white is demarcated from being (half) European.

In my final findings chapter, I delved into the most intimate corner of my respondents' lives: dating and romance. Creating another subcategory of participants, I explored the romantic encounters of my "racially ambiguous" interviewees. In this chapter, I revealed how ideologies about race, gender and sexuality infiltrate their most private experiences. I examined how respondents internalize the term "exotic" without realizing the racial and sexualized undertone that it implies. I called attention to the racial patterns and preferences of my racially ambiguous respondents and I brought to light how being biracial *and* racially ambiguous can enhance or hinder sexual opportunities. My respondents candidly shared how being racially mysterious generates sexual excitement for their partners for reasons that are laced with racist notions. Moreover, lack of sexual encounters is also linked to ideological myths about black sexual prowess. Being biracial and racially ambiguous in the bedroom was accompanied by specific expectations that were rooted in an uncritical assumption of how blackness and whiteness are embodied by the biracial intimate partner and how this racial paradox would be experienced sexually by a boyfriend, girlfriend or romantic pursuer.

### *Theoretical Implications of this Study*

This dissertation has implications for current theoretical paradigms. By juxtaposing the discrimination of interracial couples and bi/multiracial children in “Made in America: Interracial Sexuality and Bi/Multiracial Children,” I dislocate inadequate academic discourses by showing how scholars have uncritically accepted elements of racist ideology in ways that further their own scholarly agendas. I push for an analytical argument within interracial and bi/multiracial research that directly asks:

- Whose voices are dominant in these scholarly conversations?
- Why are these specific voices dominant?
- What motivation might monoracial scholars have for arguing against interracial relationships?
- What theoretical and epistemological impact are their arguments having on the direction of future research endeavors?

In “Race and Resemblance: Exploring Relationships in Multiracial Families,” I bring to the forefront the impact of lack of racial resemblance on the entire family unit. While studies are increasingly examining how monoracial parents racially socialize their bi/multiracial children, these studies lack an understanding of how racialized events or circumstances shape family relationships and the entire family dynamic. There are strong implications of this chapter for family, race and bi/multiracial studies. This study helps further the conversation about what it means to be biracial in a multiracial family from the biracial child’s perspective, not from the parents’ perspective, which other studies explore (Dalmage 2000; Harmon 2009; Twine 2010). This chapter also re-articulates the meaning of family and confronts standard understandings of “resemblance” by thinking outside of phenotypic parameters.

The term “racial capital” extends social capital and cultural capital by demonstrating other means through which information and opportunities can be acquired: through race. Racial capital is a form of capital that is based directly and explicitly on race; advantages are gained after racial in-group membership is communicated (and accepted) through knowledge, experiences, meanings and/or language. The fact that this form of capital is race-based conceptually distinguishes it from all other forms of capital, which are influenced by socio-economic background, education level and other social markers. Although these factors are shaped by structural conditions that have direct and indirect racial implications, the factors that characterize other forms of capital are not generated through deploying racial resources and conveying racial insider status in *two* racial communities. Through “racial capital,” I provide a conceptual framework for how biracials interact in social encounters with whites and blacks, which is presently absent from the literature.

Ethnic ties and immigrant status are largely nonexistent in bi/multiracial literature, including the abundant racial identity scholarship, yet having an immigrant background is significant in a series of ways for my participants. Although other studies focus on black or white immigrants (Kasinitz et al. 2008; Waters 2001), they do not study how racial and ethnic boundaries are drawn into play *within* families. The complexity of racial and ethnic boundaries as they intersect within and outside families results in far greater challenges for individuals who are attempting to negotiate race boundaries. This chapter further supports my concept of “racial capital” by demonstrating what happens where there is a *lack of* racial capital or limited racial capital. The participants with immigrant parents appeared to struggle more to carve their social space in American society as they attempted to distance themselves from the racial categories that are pregnant with stereotypes.

Few studies concentrate on dating experiences or romantic endeavors of biracial individuals; my research showed that being biracial has significant implications for intimacy. There is a dearth of research that explicitly explores biracials and sexual intimacy and this study specifically unveiled how sexual expectations and encounters were riddled with racist notions. In addition, few scholars incorporate an intersectional lens in bi/multiracial scholarship, and by looking at race, gender and sexuality, I was able to examine how these categories interlock and create different experiences depending on gender and sexual orientation. Further, a small number of studies of bi/multiracials include sexual minorities. As mentioned before, in an attempt to acknowledge complexity and diversity within this population, I analyze the experiences of gay respondents. The implications of this chapter also show that intersectionality needs to be expanded to look at intersections *within* the same social category. Only by analyzing how whiteness and blackness interlace was I able to understand comprehensively how gender and sexuality intertwined and changed meaning according to what racial background respondents were associated with.

### *Suggestions for Future Research*

In sum, as of my respondents stated, “[Race] is just skin, you know, it tells different stories for different people.” Scholars should continue to gather and analyze these stories to add pieces to the biracial American puzzle. In future work, I intend to further explore family relationships by examining the gendered and racialized patterns of parenting as well as the relationships between biracials and their monoracial half-siblings. I will also develop a deeper analysis of the relationship between gender and racial capital. In addition, I plan to examine the ways that white privilege trickles down to (half-white) biracials as a means to analyze racial privilege through a different vantage point that goes beyond skin color. In these ways, I hope to



chart a new path in bi/multiracial research, one that does not distill being biracial into one or two outcomes, but instead focuses on the meanings, processes and experiences that comprise “being biracial.”

To continue to add to the biracial American puzzle, researchers should continue decenter the monoracial conceptualizations of interracial relationships and sexuality by arguing for empirical insight rather than what appears to be personal estimations. I demonstrate how a racially homogenous understanding of family is outdated and therefore, researchers should not cling to a monoracial script of kinship. More scholarship needs to deconstruct the definition of family and redefine family to accurately reflect American racial and ethnic demographics. I also expand the traditional channels through which capital is examined by illuminating the resources and opportunities that are generated by racial capital, and by centering a conceptual framework that corresponds with these findings. If *Race Matters* (1993) as philosopher Cornel West boldly entitled his book, and if race “has been a fundamental axis of social organization in the U. S.,” as Omi and Winant (1994:13) assert, scholars should continue to explore how this social construction is communicated, navigated and reproduced in everyday social interactions, and how these practices may change over time.

Moreover, I suggest researchers continue to probe the dynamic interplay between race, ethnicity and immigrant status by looking at other bi/multiracial immigrant groups and considering that the growing number of bi/multiracials and immigrants collectively marshal in a new racial and ethnic territory in America. Lastly, I encourage more thinkers to enhance our intersectional lenses by identifying where they fall short and whose story they leave out. By building on intersectionality as a theoretical, epistemological and methodological approach, we will enrich our ability to study our social world and better equip the next generation of thinkers.

Appendix: Interview Guide

- 1). What is your name? How old are you?
- 2). Where did you grow up?
- 3). Tell me about your family. Do you know anything about your parents' relationship history? Which parents white and which is black?
- 4). Let's talk about your childhood (probe: friends, school, activities/sports).
- 5). Tell me about high school and your teenage years (probe: friends, schools, activities/sports/clubs, jobs, college (if attended)).
- 6). Let's talk about dating. How would you describe your dating experiences so far?
- 7). How would you define race?
- 8). How do you racially identify? Has this ever changed?
- 9). Can you tell me how old you were when you started to realize what race was? What was that experience like?
- 10). Let's talk about your experiences within the white and black communities. Do you feel comfortable around white people and black people? (probe: equally, ask about friends, family, events, etc.)
- 11). How do think your experiences as a (man/woman) are different from a (woman/man) who is black and white?
- 12). What do you think of President Obama (probe: being black and white, being constructed as black, identifying as black)?
- 13). Do you remember seeing biracial or mixed people on TV or in movies when you were growing up? Now?

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