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March 24, 2022

Racism and Romance: An Analysis of Interracial Relationships as a Measure of Social Progress

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An abstract of  
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences  
of Emory University in partial fulfillment  
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Bachelor of Arts with Honors

African American Studies Department

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## Abstract

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The concept of a post-racial society, the idea that the Civil Rights Movement is over and now, miraculously, African Americans are viewed as equals is one that perplexed me. Racism is inbred in the culture and systems of the United States. He also acknowledges that that is not expected to change anytime soon. Interracial relationships as a means of social progress become salient here because the role of the race shows how race is pervasive. Intimate, romantic relationships, where people are meant to be vulnerable and express deep emotions. These are ideal spaces of peace and compassion, and yet race shows up. The race is not only present but blatant in that it forces the relationship participants to acknowledge and engage in conversations about race. The research in this project reaffirms this. This thesis consists of three chapters; media analysis, interview analysis, and survey analysis. In the media analysis, I looked at TV shows from the late 1990s and early 2000s, and their conversations about interracial relationships. *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990-1996), *Moesha* (1996-2001), *Girlfriends* (2000-2008)— and argues that such media depictions limited their discussion about such relationships to emphasize outsiders' perceptions and familial responses. In the interview section, I interviewed five interracial couples. I asked 20 pre-selected questions about their respective upbringing, dating history, familial attitudes responses, etc. In this analysis, it became clear that class was a key contributing factor in understanding how families form attitudes around interracial relationships. Rephrased, wealthy families were more accepting of interracial relationships than poor families. Using exchange theory to understand this, reveals that poorer families value culture and tradition, which are areas of major interpersonal differences for interracial couples. Finally, in my survey

section, I surveyed 103 people, aged 18-24 many of which were black women. Here, I found that personal, lived experiences, had the biggest influence on how respondents formed their opinions on interracial relationships. My findings indicated that we are far from a post-racial society because even 60 years after Loving vs. Virginia, interracial relationships are still a point of contention.

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## Acknowledgments

Special thanks to Linda, Melody, Queen, Oluchi, and all the Black women in my life. You are my inspiration and the reason I write.

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## **Introduction:**

It is popular academic discourse to reference the idea of the post-racial era.<sup>1</sup> It is the idea that the Civil Rights Movement is over and now, miraculously, African Americans are viewed as equals. On the contrary, WEB DuBois writes in The Souls of Black Folk, “Years have passed away since then,--ten, twenty, forty; forty years of national life, forty years of renewal and development, and yet the swarthy specter sits in its accustomed seat at the Nation's feet. In vain do we cry to this our vastest social problem: --.”<sup>2</sup> Here, DuBois reflects on the plight of African Americans. He acknowledges that much time has passed since Black bodies were forced over the Middle Passage into slavery, and yet Black people are still experiencing social inequalities. DuBois proclaims that social progress has been slow, and much of the Black experience in the United States is riddled with injustice and inequality. This sentiment is often refuted by the fact that interracial relationships are embraced today.<sup>3</sup>

Historically, interracial relationships were illegal and punishable by death in some instances. It was not until the 1967 supreme court case, *Loving vs. Virginia*<sup>4</sup>, that anti-miscegenation laws were ruled unconstitutional.<sup>5</sup> The decision made interracial marriage

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see, Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. “The Structure of Racism in Color-Blind, ‘Post-Racial’ America.” *American Behavioral Scientist* 59, no. 11 (October 2015): 1358–76. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764215586826>.

Massey, Douglas S., Margarita Mooney, Kimberly C. Torres, and Camille Z. Charles. “Black Immigrants and Black Natives Attending Selective Colleges and Universities in the United States.” *American Journal of Education* 113, no. 2 (February 2007): 243–71. <https://doi.org/10.1086/510167>.

Lee, Jennifer, and Frank D. Bean. “Reinventing the Color Line Immigration and America’s New Racial/Ethnic Divide.” *Social Forces* 86, no. 2 (2007): 561–86. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20430754>.

<sup>2</sup> Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Dover Thrift Editions. New York: Dover, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Garcia, Ginny E., Richard Lewis, and Joanne Ford-Robertson. “Attitudes Regarding Laws Limiting Black-white Marriage: A Longitudinal Analysis of Perceptions and Related Behaviors.” *Journal of Black Studies* 46, no. 2 (2015): 199–217.

<sup>4</sup> Justia Law. “*Loving v. Virginia*, 388 U.S. 1 (1967).” Accessed April 11, 2022. <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/388/1/>.

<sup>5</sup> Hoewe, Jennifer, and Geri Alumit Zeldes. “Overturning Anti-Miscegenation Laws: News Media Coverage of the Lovings’ Legal Case Against the State of Virginia.” *Journal of Black Studies* 43, no. 4 (2012): 427–43. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23215224>.

legal. However, it did not erase the sentiments held regarding interracial marriage. Moreover, because racism is so pervasive in the American social systems, it does not stop at socially and financially crippling African Americans<sup>6</sup>, but it also shows up in some of the most intimate relationships: romantic relationships.

This thesis focuses on Black-white interracial relationships and argues that examining interracial relationships can provide a useful measure of social progress that undermines or complicates ideas that the U.S is a post-racial society. My analysis reveals that this measure expresses that race is a difficult conversation in America and a basis for creating unique challenges for interracial relationships. These challenges include concerns over negative familial responses, concerns over racialized experiences of their children, and difficult conversations within the relationship about the motivations for being in the relationship. These challenges are examples of complications of race in interracial relationships and inherently refute the ideal of post-racial America.

### Literature Review:

Journal article searches for the term “interracial relationships” yield over 20,000 papers, books, and journal articles. The current literature examines perceptions inside and outside of interracial relationships and uncovers a largely negative public reaction to interracial dating<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> “The Economic Impact of Closing the Racial Wealth Gap | McKinsey.” Accessed April 11, 2022. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/the-economic-impact-of-closing-the-racial-wealth-gap>.

<sup>7</sup> For example, see Doering, Jan. “A Battleground of Identity: Racial Formation and the African American Discourse on Interracial Marriage.” *Social Problems* 61, no. 4 (2014): 559–75. <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2014.13017>.

Field, Carolyn J., Sitawa R. Kimuna, and Murray A. Straus. “Attitudes Toward Interracial Relationships Among College Students: Race, Class, Gender, and Perceptions of Parental Views.” *Journal of Black Studies* 44, no. 7 (2013): 741–76. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24572876>.

Jacobson, Cardell K., and Bryan R. Johnson. “Interracial Friendship and African American Attitudes about Interracial Marriage.” *Journal of Black Studies* 36, no. 4 (2006): 570–84. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40034771>.

Many of these search results highlight relationships between non-Black people of color and white people both in the United States and in international studies<sup>8</sup>. The results also recount histories of anti-miscegenation laws and violence against those who have attempted these relationships. Finally, the article search highlight theories regarding the social status of biracial children, and a select few directly discuss modern Black-white interracial relationships in the United States<sup>9</sup>. Black and white interracial relationships are studied in academia primarily in Black studies<sup>10</sup>. Much of the work that appears in journal article searches is authored by infamous sociologist George Yancey. Within that scholarly material that speaks to interracial relationships, the focus is largely on social perceptions and outside expectations of interracial

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<sup>8</sup> For example, see Yancey, George, and George Yancy. "Experiencing Racism: Differences in the Experiences of Whites Married to Blacks and Non-Black Racial Minorities." *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 38, no. 2 (2007): 197–213. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41604142>.

Canlas, Jerevie M., Richard B. Miller, Dean M. Busby, and Jason S. Carroll. "Same-Race and Interracial Asian-White Couples: Relational and Social Contexts and Relationship Outcomes." *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 46, no. 3 (2015): 307–28. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43613121>.

Ponzanesi, Sandra. "The Color of Love: <em>Madamismo</em> and Interracial Relationships in the Italian Colonies." *Research in African Literatures* 43, no. 2 (2012): 155–72. <https://doi.org/10.2979/reseafritlite.43.2.155>.

<sup>9</sup> For example, see Garcia, Ginny E., Richard Lewis, and Joanne Ford-Robertson. "Attitudes Regarding Laws Limiting Black-white Marriage: A Longitudinal Analysis of Perceptions and Related Behaviors." *Journal of Black Studies* 46, no. 2 (2015): 199–217. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24572944>.

Heer, David M. "The Prevalence of Black-white Marriage in the United States, 1960 and 1970." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 36, no. 2 (1974): 246–58. <https://doi.org/10.2307/351151>.

Yancey, George A., and Sherelyn W. Yancey. "Black-white Differences in the Use of Personal Advertisements for Individuals Seeking Interracial Relationships." *Journal of Black Studies* 27, no. 5 (1997): 650–67. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2784873>.

<sup>10</sup>The following examples come from the *Journal of Black Studies* or the *Journal for African American studies*, Zebroski, Sheryline A. "Black-White Intermarriages: The Racial and Gender Dynamics of Support and Opposition." *Journal of Black Studies* 30, no. 1 (1999): 123–32. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2645896>.

AGolebiowska, Ewa A. "The Contours and Etiology of Whites' Attitudes Toward Black-White Interracial Marriage." *Journal of Black Studies* 38, no. 2 (2007): 268–87. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40034979>.

King, Rosamond S. "Sheep & Goats Together: Interracial Relationships from Black Men's Perspectives." *Journal of African American Studies* 8, no. 1/2 (2004): 108–25. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41819048>.

marriage, trends, and statistics on the frequency of interracial marriages, and the narrative complications in these relationships<sup>11</sup>.

As previously discussed, a limited amount of the focus within this scholarship emphasizes the perspectives and experiences of Black women. Two important exceptions include studies by Chito (2005) and Zebroski (1999). Erica Chito explicitly looked at the ideals and expressions of Black women regarding interracial dating<sup>12</sup>. To do this, she convened a college focus group of Black women ages 24-47 years old. Here, Chito hosted a discussion about dating experiences. In this study, the women expressed primarily negative sentiments about dating in general. One of the sentiments rampantly expressed is this idea of race loyalty, that Black women are expected to have. Black women in this study reported feeling discouraged, by family and friends, from dating interracially while also being expected to not complain about Black men who date outside of the race. This sentiment was echoed largely in the media analysis and the surveys from my research. This study ultimately found that many Black women were uncomfortable with interracial dating because of the attitudes of other people, and they were hyper-aware of the ways it disenfranchises them or limits their sense of personal choice.

This discomfort Black women have in dating interracially is reflected in Zebroski's findings. Zebroski surveyed Black and white interracial couples and asked about the other racial

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<sup>11</sup> For example, see Foeman, Anita Kathy, and Teresa Nance. "From Miscegenation to Multiculturalism: Perceptions and Stages of Interracial Relationship Development." *Journal of Black Studies* 29, no. 4 (1999): 540–57. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2645869>.

St. Jean, Yanick. "Let People Speak for Themselves: Interracial Unions and the General Social Survey." *Journal of Black Studies* 28, no. 3 (1998): 398–414. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2784741>.  
Pascoe, Peggy. "Race, Gender, and Intercultural Relations: The Case of Interracial Marriage." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 12, no. 1 (1991): 5–18. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3346572>.

<sup>12</sup> Childs, Erica Chito. "Looking behind the Stereotypes of the 'Angry Black Woman': An Exploration of Black Women's Responses to Interracial Relationships." *Gender and Society* 19, no. 4 (2005): 544–61. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30044616>.

groups that they felt that they were receiving the most support from<sup>13</sup>. This study reached about 50 people in the United States, and the study participants were contracted from advertisements in interracial dating magazines specifically, “Interrace” and “New People”. The study found that white men perceived no support for their interracial relationship from Black men and white women. On the other hand, Black men reported feeling support from all racial groups except Black women. This study contributes fondly to the discussion of interracial relationships as a measure of social progress. Because different races appear to have different perceptions of support from other races, not only displays an acknowledgment of racial differences but participation within it. By participants identifying racial groups from whom they receive support, they display that race relations are still complicated. Moreover, it begs the question of how much progress could have been made, when there are stark discrepancies about which individuals from whom people perceive support?

The findings of my research show that personal lived experience is the biggest determinate of comfort levels within interracial relationships. This means that culture, family values, tradition, etc. largely influence whether people felt supportive of interracial relationships or not. Also, contrary to the findings from the Zebroski study, racial groups did not have similar ideals around interracial relationships. This simply means Black women survey respondents and interview participants did not have similar responses on account of their race. The interview respondents made clear, however, that class is a key factor in attitudes surrounding interracial relationships. Participants from wealthier families reported having more family engagement in their relationships. However, all of these contributing factors, like culture, tradition, and class,

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<sup>13</sup> Zebroski, Sheryline A. “Black-white Intermarriages: The Racial and Gender Dynamics of Support and Opposition.” *Journal of Black Studies* 30, no. 1 (1999): 123–32. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2645896>.

show the complexity of the current conversations about race and generally refute discussions about the existence of a post-racial society.

The Doering study provides critical context for my research in that she provides an understanding of earlier social perceptions of interracial relationships. In a 2014 study, Jan Doering examined the twentieth-century Black Press to construct an understanding of Black people's attitudes towards interracial relationships. Doering collected and analyzed letters to the editors from five major Black newspapers.<sup>14</sup> These letters were all in response to news items that had been published about interracial relationships and were received between 1920 and 1990, with most of the letters being received in the 1940s. By the 1990s, the letters received on the matter drastically decreased. Doering's study recognizes that letters to the editor represent a genuine interest in interrupting or contributing to the conversations about interracial relationships in the media. They, therefore, present an important source of information regarding Black public perceptions of interracial relationships. Overall, most of the letters written in opposition were written by Black men and cited concerns for lack of racial solidarity and racial pride for why interracial marriage shouldn't happen. On the other hand, many of the letters written in support of interracial marriage cited that "true love" overcomes all and the fact that race was a social construct that should not exist in the first place. My research resonates strongly with Doering's work. Through the use of surveys, interviews, and a media analysis my research looks intently at the dynamics influenced by race within the relationship and how people form these attitudes. Doering's classifications of the responses were used to structure the survey questions, which ultimately reinforced the ideals that she found.

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<sup>14</sup> Doering, Jan. "A Battleground of Identity: Racial Formation and the African American Discourse on Interracial Marriage." *Social Problems* 61, no. 4 (2014): 559–75. <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2014.13017>.

Vaquera and Kao take an interesting approach by specifically working with children as young as 12 and using age-appropriate terminology to identify how racial attitudes and teachings shape their initial romantic experiences<sup>15</sup>. In 2005, they studied over 90,000 young people in grades 7 through 12 in the U.S. and their experiences dating within and outside of their races. The survey asked about the frequency that they dated outside of their race, the types of romantic behavior exhibited within these relationships, especially public displays of affection. The researchers compared white American, Black American, Asian American, and Native American student experiences. The study found that African Americans had the fewest number of students who attempted interracial relationships. The study also found that young interracial couples at large were less likely to introduce their partners to their friends and family. This is particularly unique because the participants were relatively young and were generally limited in their abilities to participate in traditional dating practices.

Many young people are heavily dependent on their parents and these parents often set limitations on what their romantic relationships, if any at all, can look like. This age group, however, further highlights the impact of parents and outside perspectives on the inner dynamics of such relationships. Failing to introduce their romantic partners to their support system can be telling of the seriousness of that relationship. It is also telling of the anxiety around the responses of said family and friends. This ultimately suggests that even at a young age, interracial relationships and their dynamics are impacted by family and friend dynamics. This is true of most relationships, but the difference here is that it is predicated on race, further lending the findings of this study to a conversation refuting the post-racial era discussion.

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<sup>15</sup> Vaquera, Elizabeth, and Grace Kao. "Private and Public Displays of Affection Among Interracial and Intra-Racial Adolescent Couples." *Social Science Quarterly* 86, no. 2 (2005): 484–508. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42956075>.

This is consistent with my finding, as my demographic was also young people. Many of my survey participants were between 18 and 24 years of age, and this is about the time that most people engage in romantic relationships. The lack of experience can result in limited perceptions of said relationships, causing survey respondents to rely more heavily on culture and family values for their attitude formation, which is exactly what my research finds.

In attempting to accommodate for the difference in dating dynamics of younger people, researchers also looked at “liked” relationships, in which two young people express attraction for one another but there is little to no “official” romantic labeling or behavior. This is more common among this age demographic and studying them also provides an insight into the desires of the studied population. The study tells us that African American students had the highest percentage of liked relationships. Other races had more attempted and current romantic relationships. This suggests that while African American students attempt fewer interracial relationships, they are interested in people outside of their race. African American students had more “liked” relationships than students of other races, suggesting that the attraction is there. Furthermore, this suggests that there is some anxiety around the consequences of formalizing these relationships. This is not to assume causation, however, race as a factor in the fear of the consequences is undeniable.

The current scholarship leans heavily towards racialized perceptions of attitudes to interracial relationships. Generally, the consensus is that interracial dating and marriages are in a word, complex, and evoke a myriad of largely negatives response by the public and parties outside of interracial relationships. Like some of these studies that take both quantitative and qualitative approaches, this thesis does the same, while paying particular attention to the range of social factors that impact current perceptions of interracial relations. The principal factors this



thesis takes up that impact perceptions and attitudes about romantic interracial relationships include class, family values, and culture.

Similar to the Vaquera study, this project looks mainly at a young adult population of 18-24 years of age. This is done in part for convenience and validity, but also because young adults partake in various relationships at a greater rate than others. They also, often, are subject less to bias and stereotypes as they are experiencing the world for themselves. This is especially salient when recalling that negative sentiments of interracial relationships are dated 60+ years ago when it was illegal.<sup>16</sup> This is outside the lifetime of many young adults today, and the presence of said negative sentiments provides insight into the pervasiveness of said dated sentiments. Put differently, understanding the timeline of anti-miscegenation laws means that it is expected for older people to have stronger reservations than younger people. Many older people lived through or had more direct interaction with the consequences of interracial relationships.

The thesis relied on three distinct methods of analysis: media analysis, interviews, and surveys. This thesis combines media analysis with interviews and surveys to explore experiences and perceptions surrounding interracial relationships. The media analysis looked at important Black television shows from the 1990s and early 2000s and their respective conversations about interracial relationships. In interpreting the television episodes, historical context and exchange theory<sup>17</sup> were applied. Each of these episodes depicts young Black women dating young white men, allowing the analysis to be framed by the perspective of Black women. This framing was also used in the interviews. I interviewed five interracial couples via zoom. I interviewed two white women married to Black men, one Black man who was seriously involved with a white

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<sup>16</sup> Marchetti, Antonella, Francesca Baglio, Ilaria Castelli, Ludovica Griffanti, Raffaello Nemni, Federica Rossetto, Annalisa Valle, Michela Zanette, e Davide Massaro. "Social Decision Making in Adolescents and Young Adults: Evidence From the Ultimatum Game and Cognitive Biases." *Psychological Reports* 122, no. 1 (February 2019): 135–54. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033294118755673>.

<sup>17</sup> Rosenfeld, Michael J. "A Critique of Exchange Theory in Mate Selection." *American Journal of Sociology* 110, no. 5 (2005): 1284–1325. <https://doi.org/10.1086/428441>.

woman, and two Black women married to white women. I asked them roughly 20 questions about their respective dating history, their respective upbringing, the reception of their friends and family, and conversations about having kids. Each interview took an hour and was recorded. I surveyed 103 young adults aged 18-24, with a few responses coming from people in their 30s. Most of the participants were Black women. Only information from heterosexual respondents was used to control for the variability included in sexuality. Microsoft forms were used to conduct surveys and store the responses. Microsoft Excel was used for the data analysis; it produced graphs, and statistics like R-values, P-Values, averages, etc. that I intercepted to identify trends, or the lack thereof. The trends include, class and culture being the largest contributing factor in how people form ideas around interracial relationships. Another key trend is how differences in culture make expanding families difficult and causes disputes within the couple and their collective families.

This thesis consists of three chapters; each chapter is organized around one of my primary research methods. The first chapter analyzes depictions of interracial relationships in three TV shows – *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990-1996), *Moesha* (1996-2001), *Girlfriends* (2000-2008)– and argues that such media depictions limited their discussion about such relationships to emphasize outsiders’ perceptions and familial responses. The chapter argues further that such emphasis on outsiders’ perceptions or opinions obscures or lessens the importance of the internal dynamics of interracial relationships. It does, however, show that many attitudes surrounding interracial relationships require deep historical and social contexts.

The second chapter analyzes the information gathered in the interviews I conducted. I interviewed a total of five Black-white interracial relationships, specifically looking at the dynamics within the relationship. Most of the couples ranged between 21 and 55 years of age,

with most couples being in their 20s and 30s and only one couple were in their 60s. This chapter identified many trends regarding the complications within a relationship, including the connection between the participants' environment and the fact that they were in relationships. This analysis also produced the finding that class may be a better predictor of attitudes surrounding interracial relationships than race, gender, and age. Class was the only variable that saw consistency in my research that low-income families regardless of race tended to be less accepting of interracial relationships than higher-income families. This chapter discusses the role of exchange theory and higher education in his finding.

The third chapter paints a picture of how the public, specifically those aged 18-24 feel about interracial relationships from an analysis of survey responses. My analysis finds that, contrary to the Zebroski study, factors like race and gender do not play as big of a role in forming attitudes to interracial relationships for my survey and interview subjects. Class was not discussed; in that, it was not included in the survey. This was not intentional, however, considering the demographic and that this age range is made up of people still shaping their careers, there is a question as to how much information about the class in the surveys would have been useful. Nonetheless, this analysis led to the discovery that personal, lived experiences shaped the sentiments towards interracial relationships.

My analysis looks at interracial relationships as a meter for social progress and is ultimately able to refute the notion of the post-racial era, that some scholars claim we are currently in. If anything, race is as relevant now as ever and is present in all aspects of life. Interracial relationships show that race and racism are pervasive in and around our most intimate relationships, and subsequently show how strained race relations remain today.

In the media analysis, they show the concern surrounding familial responses and the stress that places on the dynamics within the relationships. It also shows the influence of historical context, specifically in understanding that Black people are aware that historically interracial relationships lead to violence. There is hesitancy and fear of history repeating itself, or in the least fear that those sentiments from the past remain.

In the survey and interview chapters, the analysis of interracial relationships highlights the role class plays in determining how families respond to their children in interracial relationships. Wealthier families were more accepting of interracial relationships than poorer families, and when viewed through the lens of exchange theory the reason for this boils down to values. Poorer families often do not value wealth as much as they do culture, traditions, political affiliations, etc. So, despite someone from a different race appearing to have many positive attributes, if they cannot enjoy similar music or do not appreciate the same hobbies, the other family may struggle to accept them.

The survey analysis found that outside of class, other factors like race and gender do not solely shape attitudes towards interracial marriages. Individual experiences and interactions within the dynamic of interracial relationships ultimately shape the insights most severely. The stressors and challenges imposed on those interracial relationships identified in my research reinforce the ability for interracial relationships to be measures of social progress. It also refutes discourse claiming that we are living in a post-racial America.

## **Depictions of Interracial Relationships on TV**

In 2013, General Mills released a commercial for their Cheerios<sup>18</sup>. This commercial begins with a biracial girl asking her white mom if Cheerios are good for the heart. When her mother confirms this, she goes and pours the Cheerios on her Black dad's chest while he is asleep on the couch. This commercial was seemingly innocuous—a sweet innocent expression of care for a loved one— but it sparked some much discourse and outrage that General Mills removed the commercial from their website within a few weeks. The outrage was over interracial relationships, and this discourse displays that even in the 21st century interracial relationships have not been generally accepted. It also depicted the importance of representation in what is perceived as normal, especially in social and romantic relationships.

Discussions surrounding interracial relationships often reflect the state of race relations in the United States. These discussions often take place most explicitly in the media, specifically in television shows. This makes analyzing T.V. shows, especially ones with cultural salience, an important means of understanding attitudes and discourses around concepts like interracial relationships. In the conversation of interracial relationships, Television gives an insight into the depictions and discourse around and within them. It shows the significance of race in interracial relationships, and the challenges and negative perceptions it creates for those involved. To explore these challenges, I will analyze staple 1990s and 2000s television shows like *Moesha*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, and *Girlfriends*, and their discussions of both long-term and short-term interracial relationships. This discussion will explore themes of color-blind sentiments and emphasis on cultural differences that ultimately emphasize the unique challenges that they

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<sup>18</sup> News, A. B. C. "Video Interracial Cheerios Commercial Generates Debate." ABC News. Accessed April 13, 2022. <https://abcnews.go.com/GMA/video/interracial-cheerios-commercial-generates-debate-19307796>.

face. Also, many of these shows focus extensively on the perception of the relationship from those outside of the relationship. And because this consumes so much of the conversation, the depiction of the dynamics within the relationship is inadequately discussed. Fundamentally, this discussion illustrates that these depictions are limited in their ability to have an adequate discussion of interracial relationships. And their limitations show the lack of social progress and hyper fixation on outside perceptions that prevent said social progress.

### Short-Term Interracial Relationships in TV shows

Current conversations about interracial relationships largely center on outside perceptions of the relationships, and this is seen in the TV depictions. The 1996 sitcom, *Moesha*, follows the challenges and opportunities presented by a teenage Black girl and her friends and family. Moesha herself is a smart, driven, and charismatic 16-year-old. Her mother is deceased, and she is raised by her stepmother, Dee, and her father, Frank. She has a young brother, Miles, and an abundance of friends that care for her. In one of the episodes, Moesha is reunited with a childhood crush, who was a white boy. When Moesha tells her father that she plans to go on a date with him, he is against this idea. He says, “Now, I don’t want something bad to happen to you just because some crazy person has something to prove.”<sup>19</sup> This sentiment is loaded with negativity surrounding interracial relationships. The first assumption Frank makes is that if Moesha should hang out with a white man, something bad could happen to her. This does not mean he is necessarily worried that the boy will hurt her, although this is a real possibility. It does, however, acknowledge that people may not share the same open-mindedness as Moesha, as that may cause harm. The next assumption Frank makes here is that these people who seek to cause harm are crazy. In making this assumption, Frank makes clear his position on interracial dating that, interracial dating is not worth said harm, and more importantly he does not want his

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<sup>19</sup> Season 1, Episode 12, Timestamp 12:30

daughter to have to face that harm. In asserting that those that want to hurt people who date outside of their race are crazy, Frank acknowledges the extremes that people are willing to go to defend their beliefs. These concerns are validated from the historical context of the matter.

Historically interracial couples faced threats, abuse, and even death because of their relationship. A study published by Piatkowska et. al, found a positive correlation between rates of interracial relationships and rates of anti-Black hate crime victimization. This translates to Black people facing more violence in areas where there is more Black and white interracial marriage. This study does not explicitly discuss violence faced by people in relationships. It does however present an understanding that people who are in the relationships experience violence on account of their relationship. This violence dates as far back as slavery and reconstruction in which Black men were viciously lynched for even a mention of sleeping with white women. The story of Emmet Till<sup>20</sup> is a vivid example of this violence. In 1955, Carolyn Bryant was a white woman who claimed that Emmet Till, who was 14 years old, had whistled at her. Later that night, Some of Bryant's male family members went to where Till was staying, pulled him out of bed, and proceeded to mercilessly beat him before he was murdered. In this instance, there was not even a legitimate relationship or detection of romance, it was purely speculation. This means that simply the thought of a Black person expressing romantic interest in a white person sparked deadly outrage. This rage led Till to his death, only for years later for Bryant to come forward and say that she made up the allegations.

But the context of Frank's sentiment doesn't end here. More contextually to the time that this episode of Moesha was shot in, was the murder of Yusef Hawkins<sup>21</sup> and Rodney King<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> See Perloff, Richard M. "The Press and Lynchings of African Americans." *Journal of Black Studies* 30, no. 3 (2000): 315–30. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2645940> for more information

<sup>21</sup> See <https://time.com/5879097/yusuf-hawkins-storm-over-brooklyn-racism/> for more information

<sup>22</sup> See <https://www.npr.org/2017/04/26/524744989/when-la-erupted-in-anger-a-look-back-at-the-rodney-king-riots> for more information

Hawkins was murdered by a white gang after there was speculation that he dated a white girl. This occurred in 1989 in New York. Soon after in 1991, Rodney King, an unarmed Black man was a victim of police brutality at the hands of the LAPD. This murder sparked outrage and riots that embodied the tense race relations of this time. Both incidents display the lengths that some people were willing to go to reinforce their beliefs, more specifically to defend their white pride. Frank's final assumption is that these crazy people who intend to harm Moesha and Matt are trying to prove a point. This context makes it clear that when Frank is cautioning his daughter against "crazy people" with something to prove, he is talking most specifically about the people who use violence as a means of standing for their opposition to interracial relationships. Frank, being an older man, is presumably more familiar with this reality than Moesha and is genuinely concerned for the wellbeing of his daughter. All these assumptions in their context point to an understanding that many other people are not as open to interracial dating as Moesha might like to believe. These sentiments are foreshadowing because Moesha and Matt experience discrimination and maltreatment from their peers who do not approve of their relationship later in the show when they go on a date. It is apparent by Frank's opposition, that he does not think highly of interracial relationships

Dee, Moesha's stepmom, while not explicitly saying whether she is in favor of Moesha dating this boy, protests Frank's line of reasoning. Also, Moesha's best friend Kim is verbally in favor of Moesha and Matt going on a date. They even go out together. This suggests that Black women, at least within the show, are more supportive of their interracial relationship than others. Even the Black club owner, Andell, at the end of their date, defends Moesha and expresses that all are welcome in her shop. This is consistent with the research in that in numerous studies including the Zebroski study, Black women saw other Black women as supporters of interracial



marriages. However, this does not translate that all the Black women in the show necessarily support Moesha, but rather support her happiness. They all care deeply about her, and none of them explicitly say that they like Matt or support their relationship.

However, they don't offer stark opposition like Frank and Andell. In other words, they are more concerned with Moesha and her well-being, than the race of her partner. This suggests a degree of solidarity or mutual respect and understanding amongst Black women in the show, particularly in the intricacies of interracial dating. This feeling of solidarity ultimately comes from understanding similar positioning.

As Black women, they presumably had similar if not shared dating experiences with Black men. This is not to say that Black dating experiences are monolithic, however, some trends do arise. In the study conducted by Childs on perceptions of interracial dating by Black women, Child discusses the concerns of Black women when dating in general. Specifically, Child mentions the "shortage of marriageable Black men". Marriageable, refers to men who are age-appropriate, similar in education and income, heterosexual, and single.<sup>23</sup> This is not to talk of personable or physically attractive and is purely based on logistics. These shortages are in part, a result of systemic racism, disparities in incarceration rates, inadequate resources in early development, etc. These factors ultimately mean that there are more Black men available than Black women meaning that Black women are inevitably left to either be alone or date outside of their race. This shortage ultimately impacts all Black women who date Black men and thus enables Black women to have shared experiences and relate to one another in ways others may not be able. In this Moesha episode, that exact solidarity is embodied, especially because in

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<sup>23</sup> Childs, Erica Chito. "Looking behind the Stereotypes of the 'Angry Black Woman': An Exploration of Black Women's Responses to Interracial Relationships." *Gender and Society* 19, no. 4 (2005): 544–61. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30044616>.

previous episodes, Andell is shown struggling with her romantic relationships. In the shared experiences are understandings of the difficulties of finding a good man.

When Moesha and Matt go out in public together, they are faced with discrimination from both their Black and white counterparts. Initially, they go out to a predominantly white club. Here, they play pool and encounter two white women. The first is Paige, a girl who appears to be friends with Matt. She flirts with Matt in front of Moesha, and when Matt tells her that he is with Moesha, she laughs and says “If anything changes you know where to find me.”<sup>24</sup> This is disrespectful because it implies that she believes Moesha is a fling and will not last long in Matt’s life.

Moesha and Matt also experience discrimination from the white club owner. The club owner messes up their order, and when Moesha and Matt complain, she remarks that they are the ones that are “mixed up” and ignores them. This phrase is a play on the fact that they are in that interracial relationship, but ultimately expresses disapproval of their relationship. It is also worth noting that she does not know either of them or yet still feels compelled to mistreat them because they want to be together. It is rooted in the understanding that people should date within their races. This can be understood as a product of white supremacy in that this white woman believed that Matt should not be dating Moesha. The concern in this instance and instances like it is the fear of mixed-race children. These children ultimately take away from the white race and are subject to the afro-pessimistic concerns of being partly Black. She reinforces her stance by refusing to serve them, but in uttering the terms “mixed up” the club owner, whose name is never revealed, is tapping into her whiteness to reject Moesha and Matt physically and metaphorically being together.

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<sup>24</sup> Season 1, Episode 12, Timestamp 17:54

The maltreatment at the white club causes Moesha and Matt to go to a predominantly Black club. Many of Moesha's friends are here and one of them tries to start a fight with Matt claiming that she is a "little miss too good for the hood" because Matt is white. As previously mentioned, this is where Andell breaks up the fight and says that all are welcomed in her club. At the end of the episode, Matt takes Moesha home and they decide to let this date be the last. The music is slow and somber and both Moesha and Matt have facial expressions of sadness and disappointment because of the way the evening turned out. Without much discussion, they decide that this is goodbye and that seeing each other is too much stress. Moesha goes into the house and when her parents ask how the date was, she responds with "There are some real tripped-out people out there", she then proceeds to run to her room.

The scenes of them experiencing discrimination happen concurrently and are meant to depict those interracial relationships that are not solely rejected by white people. It is, however, important to look at where the discrimination is coming from and the inherent concern. In the white club, Moesha is completely disregarded by Paige. This is not only disrespectful, but it shows that Moesha is not seen as someone worth respecting. Paige recognized Moesha as a fling that would not last long. This perception of Moesha, in juxtaposition with her status as a Black woman can be explained through stereotypes of Black hypersexuality. Black women have often been thought of as sexually insatiable and promiscuous. By Paige telling Matt to call her when he's "done" with Moesha, it is Paige seeing Moesha as temporary and purely for imminent sexual relief.

On the other hand, when Moesha and Matt were at the Black club, Moesha's peers also did not take kindly to their relationship. In the "little miss too good for the hood" comment, Moesha's friend makes comments on class and race. It is rooted in the understanding that for

some Black people, dating white people is seen as a betrayal to their people, but also as dating up in terms of the social ladder. The hood has long-held stereotypes of poverty and general low-class<sup>25</sup>. By claiming that Moesha was “too good for the hood”, it suggests that Moesha’s friend thought that Moesha was dating Matt because he perceived it to be an improvement from the men that she grew up around. The idea that whom Moesha chooses to date is an indicator of self-worth, and more specifically that choosing to date a white man, is a suggestion of superior self-worth is yet another sentiment rooted in afro-pessimism and white supremacy.<sup>26</sup> In a society where white ness holds many privileges, dating someone who is white is seen as wanting access to those privileges, to the extent of leaving behind one’s race. This is the betrayal that Moesha’s friend is alluding to when he calls her too good for the hood.

In spaces that they were initially celebrated in as individuals, as a couple, they are discriminated against; Moesha and Matt experience different forms of discrimination from their respective racial groups. This difference highlights the white supremacy and the white privilege that impacts interracial marriages. At the white club, Moesha and Matt were refused service. This is reminiscent of segregation during the civil rights movement, and similarly, their respective races impacted their ability to move freely within society.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, at the Black club, Matt almost got into a fight with another patron because of a rude comment made to Moesha. That type of verbal provocation also makes it difficult to go be comfortable in this social setting, but it came from someone within the establishment and did not entirely imply that

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<sup>25</sup> Anna Maria Santiago, Eun Lye Lee, Jessica L. Lucero, and Rebecca Wiersma. “How Living in the ‘Hood Affects Risky Behaviors Among Latino and African American Youth.” *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 3, no. 2 (2017): 170–209. <https://doi.org/10.7758/rsf.2017.3.2.08>.

<sup>26</sup> GILLBORN, DAVID. “Rethinking white Supremacy: Who Counts in ‘white World.’” *Ethnicities* 6, no. 3 (2006): 318–40. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23889382>.

<sup>27</sup> Peñalver, Eduardo Moisés, and Sonia K. Katyal. “EXPRESSIVE OUTLAWS: CIVIL RIGHTS SIT-INS.” In *Property Outlaws: How Squatters, Pirates, and Protesters Improve the Law of Ownership*, 64–70. Yale University Press, 2010. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1nq0pt.8>.

Moesha and Matt needed to leave. White supremacy and white privilege are systemic influences that inherently give white people the justification and the power to refuse service. In this regard, Moesha and Matt are no longer acknowledged as their respective race, but through the lens of their collective races.

Finally, the end of the episode emphasizes Moesha's newfound understanding of the need for social progress regarding interracial relationships. For this episode, the cameras show a diverse group of children playing together outside and Moesha's voiceover says, "I can't let the ignorant attitudes of a few dictate what I do" and says that maybe one day she and Matt will meet again. This portion encourages people to move past the ignorant attitudes of others, especially as Moesha struggled to do the same. Rephrased, the disclaimer acknowledges that the negative outcome and experiences of Moesha's interracial date are suggestive of the values and concerns of the writers or producers of the episode. To counter this, the episode ends on a high note, or at least an optimistic note, that is hopeful for social progress.

This episode revealed that even in adolescence race cannot be ignored in interracial relationships. It prioritized conversations about the outside perceptions of these relationships as opposed to the relationship between Moesha and Matt itself. Because of this, Moesha and Matt are not fully able to develop a romantic relationship. In other episodes, Moesha dates a series of boys, and the audience gets a meaningful glimpse of the dynamics within and outside of the relationship. In this sole episode of interracial dating, the focus is placed extensively on the outside perceptions. The audience does not get to see their romance develop. This was done presumably to emphasize the magnitude of the challenges that they faced because of their race. However, in that being the focus, the actual relationship is not able to develop, and this further

highlights the need for original research that addresses the dynamics within the relationship itself.

Similarly, in *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990), the topic of interracial marriage is discussed with a primary focus on the external aspects of the relationship. In season 2, episode 6, titled, “Guess who’s coming to Marry,” in which the rest of Will’s extended family prepares for his youngest aunt, Janice to get married. The title pays homage to “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner”, the 1967 film in which a white woman and a Black man combat deal with the societal and familial concerns of their romantic relationship.<sup>28</sup> This movie was released the same year as the supreme court case *Loving vs. Virginia*, the legalized interracial marriage nationwide. The film focused on the barriers faced by a young interracial couple in their efforts to be together, and this foreshadows what is to come within this episode itself. Up until this episode, the family had never met Janice’s fiancé, Frank, and the episode focuses heavily on their reactions and concerns for Janice.

In the episode, the family is shocked that he is white. They initially mistake him for the cab driver, suggesting how confident they were that Janice was going to be introducing them to a Black man. After the initial shock has passed, the conversation then shifts to disbelief and discomfort with the marriage. One of Janice’s sisters remarks, “What is wrong with her,” and Will’s mom is so uncomfortable she refuses to be at the wedding. These echo the sentiments from *Moesha*, in that Janice’s sister implies again that there is something wrong with those who choose to engage in interracial relationships. Vy outright protests the wedding.

Later in the show, Vy reveals to Janice that she is worried about the obstacles she will face as a Black woman if she chooses to date a white man. Vy says, “Don’t you have enough

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<sup>28</sup> Smith, Claude J. “Crossing the Color Line: Interracial Couples in Films From ‘Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner’ to ‘Die Another Day.’” *Studies in Popular Culture* 26, no. 3 (2004): 61–74. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23414934>.

issues being an African American woman? Do you need a white man to complicate things further?" This sentiment presents a very direct concern about race. It is predicated on the understanding that interracial relationships are complicated and have conflicting factors. It is unclear what specifically Vy thinks will make her life harder from dating a white man, but it can be implied that there is a concern for the perception of others and how they may react negatively. This has a similar historical context to the Moesha episode, which explains that Black people acknowledge the violence historically inflicted on them because of mere hints of interracial relationships. Acknowledging that Janice is an African American woman who speaks more to her social experiences within a primarily white world, and so the complications of dating a white man could most amplify that. Vy and Janice's discussion highlighted the potential for complicated racialized and gendered experiences of Black women in an interracial relationship.

In this episode, it is important to note that only the woman had an issue with Janice dating a white man. Most of the negative remarks made by the people in the show are made by Black women which deviates from what is understood within the research. For example, in the Zebroski study, Black women perceived other Black women as being more supportive of interracial dating than Black men.<sup>29</sup> But given that these women are Janice's sisters, there is a different concern. The threat posed by dating outside of one's race becomes familial instead of just a political discussion. Put differently, when these women saw their sister's fiancé, they saw a future with challenges and opportunities that come with dating a white man. This fear was enough to interfere with their familial relationship. Vy's concern became a form of protest to urge her sister to not continue with her relationship. She was going to miss her sister's wedding, an event that should have been embraced because she recognized the magnitude of the potential

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<sup>29</sup> Zebroski, Sheryline A. "Black-white Intermarriages: The Racial and Gender Dynamics of Support and Opposition." *Journal of Black Studies* 30, no. 1 (1999): 123–32. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2645896>.

harm. This suggests that Vy, despite loving her sister, did not see a value, or at least not a value worth reconciling with, in their union. It took reflection and a meaningful conversation before Vy could see that value, but before that, she was quick and pervasive in her decision to not be a part of or attend, and even ask her son to do the same. This discussion ultimately displays the social implications of class and socio-economic comfort that influence Black women to not support interracial relationships.

The television show, *Girlfriends* (2000), takes a more color-blind approach to discuss interracial relationships. The color-blind sentiment is the idea that skin color is irrelevant. Initially in the 7th episode of the 1st season, the concept of an interracial relationship is a secondary story in which Toni, the best friend to main character Joan, briefly dates a white man named Tim. The primary story is about Mya and the potential for her husband to have been cheating on her. Tim is a politician who has never dated a Black woman and learns a lot about the Black experience from dating Toni. In the first scene of them together, they are in Toni's bedroom and about to be intimate before Toni belts out that her hair is a weave, and that if Tim has a problem about it, he "should leave".<sup>30</sup> The episode ends with Tim and Toni going to a political speaking engagement.

First, the dynamic of Toni and Tim's relationship embodies the exchange theory as it applies to interracial relationships. This theory dates to 1958 when a German Sociologist first discussed the give and take nature of some social behaviors.<sup>31</sup> In 2005, Sociologist Michael Rosenberg applied this theory to mate selection in interracial relationships in his paper titled, "A Critique of Exchange Theory in Mate Selection".<sup>32</sup> In this paper, Rosenberg says that there are social advantages for Black people to marry and marry white people. Rosenberg also says that

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<sup>30</sup> Season 2, Episode 6

<sup>31</sup> Homans, George C. "Social Behavior as Exchange." *American Journal of Sociology* 63, no. 6 (1958): 597–606. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2772990>.

<sup>32</sup> Rosenfeld, Michael J. "A Critique of Exchange Theory in Mate Selection." *American Journal of Sociology*



the advantages for white people marrying Black people usually lie in factors outside of their race, like beauty, intelligence, etc. In essence, Rosenberg says that some who choose to interracially date and marry, do so with an understanding of what they can gain.

In the context of this *Girlfriends* episode, Tim, being a white politician, had better odds of getting voters of color to vote for him, by showing his appreciation and acceptance of diversity. In this instance, he does that by dating Toni. From this, he gains a form of social capital that he intended to use. And regarding the outside perspectives, there is great emphasis on the fact that the politician is not rich as opposed to the fact that he is white. In the episode, the conflict for Toni specifically is that he is not wealthy. This echoes the color-blind sentiment in that Toni is not necessarily concerned with the race of her partner but more so his money. By decentering race, it shows that Tim is in essence not different from Toni's other partners. This approach largely aims at normalizing interracial relations, but it can also be limited in its ability to acknowledge the nuances. In this context, the nuances become apparent anyway, but the initial discussion of this relationship resides largely within the color-blind sentiment.

When Mya says that she is surprised to see her date a councilman, Toni remarks that she has dated white men before and Mya responds with "But you've never dated a broke man before."<sup>33</sup> Toni also talks about the fact that the councilman controls zoning and that she is a real estate agent. Dating Tim means that she will have financial advantages and ultimately further her business. This consistent exchange theory is that Tim is dating Toni potentially for the progressive liberal appearance, and Toni is dating him for a financial advantage. This is to suggest that neither of them had entirely pure, or romantic intentions within this relationship, which serves to make this relationship easy to dismiss and laugh at within the relationship.

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<sup>33</sup> Timestamp 1:42

Tim embarrasses Toni with a comment about her hair, and in turn, exposes the significance of their cultural differences. In the same political speaking engagement as previously mentioned, Tim then tells everyone that she is wearing a weave, and Toni appears to be mortified. He phrases this news and says, “I have just discovered that her hair is a weave”<sup>34</sup>, and proceeds to talk about a metaphor between Toni wearing a weave and the ability to oppose cultures to “weave together”<sup>35</sup>. This part of the episode has a laugh track as well as cuts to Joan and Lynn laughing at the TV. The humorous nature was meant to be comedic relief. It also highlights the embarrassing nature of disrespecting the discretion around Black hair. By sharing this, Tim has encroached on a sensitive subject for many Black women, especially Toni. She is horrified and eventually runs off stage from the embarrassment. Much of their relationship in this episode is trivial and surrounded by jokes but creates space for a conversation about the cultural differences present. Tim’s failure to understand the significance of Black hair is symbolic of the everyday misunderstandings that can and do happen in interracial relationships.

#### Long-Term Interracial Relationships on TV

Later, in the show, Toni begins dating a white man long-term and viewers get a detailed look into the nuances of their relationship within their dynamic of the race. Toni dates Todd who is a white Jewish plastic surgeon who Toni originally knew through consults with him about her body. They run into each other randomly through the third season and by the end of that they begin dating. Todd is a unique choice for Toni because she is almost exclusively depicted in the show dating tall, wealthy, Black men. Todd, being a doctor, is wealthy but it is later revealed that he is in a lot of debt. Todd is also short, specifically shorter than Toni. She makes several jokes about his height. He appears to lack in many categories that were shown to be relevant to her.

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<sup>34</sup> Timestamp 20:09

<sup>35</sup> Timestamp 20:30

This ultimately seeks to emphasize the magnitude of their feelings for one another and reinforce the “true love” sentiment seen in the research. According to the Doering study<sup>36</sup>, true love was cited as a justification for interracial relationships. This is the understanding that love and romantic sentiments can surpass perceived racial discourse within a relationship. This understanding is embraced by Toni and Todd, in that despite their significant racial and personal differences, their relationship persevered.

It is also worth noting that Toni intentionally hides him from her mother. She recognizes that her mother would protest because he is white and not Black. Toni has no issue introducing Todd. It isn't until Toni and Todd get married that Todd is permitted to meet her family. Toni and Todd go on to have this extravagant wedding. After the wedding, Todd asks to move in with Toni and she insists that they buy a house. Todd expresses that he is in serious debt and subsequently cannot buy her a house. This causes immense tension in the relationship and eventually, Todd begins to feel undervalued in their relationship. Todd tells Toni that he wants to get a divorce and Toni tells him that she is pregnant. When Toni finally accepts that Todd is divorcing her, she reconnects with a tall Black man that she used to date named Paul. When Todd found out that Toni was seeing someone else, he decided to rekindle things and get her back. This is noteworthy in that it juxtaposed Todd with Paul because it was Toni's choice. In this episode, Toni ends up with Todd. And because Paul was Black and fit well with what the audience had been told about Toni and her preferences in men, the comparison further goes to support the “true love” sentiment. Even Though James appears to be everything Toni wants and needs in a man, she defaults to Todd.

### Conclusion:

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<sup>36</sup> Doering, Jan. “A Battleground of Identity: Racial Formation and the African American Discourse on Interracial Marriage.” *Social Problems* 61, no. 4 (2014): 559–75. <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2014.13017>.

Each of the television shows described shows the limitations of discussing interracial relationships in such brevity and the importance of context in understanding these discussions. By depicting the highs and lows of Toni and Todd's as well as Toni and Tim's relationship, *Girlfriends* (2000) gave a unique platform for an in-depth discussion of an interracial relationship. *Girlfriends* displayed those interracial relationships largely consider other factors like class. Toni wanted Tim because he was a politician who could advance her career. With Todd, Toni's initial concerns over his height were appeased when she realized he was wealthy, and of course that he cared for her.

This discussion is different from sitcoms like *Moesha* and *the Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* which give the topic no more than one episode. Because of this, the audience is limited in the extent of the conversation it can have about the challenges in interracial relationships. However, they do have value in their discussion of the outside perceptions. Most of those episodes hyper-focus on the largely negative responses from family members, friends, and strangers in interracial relationships. Much of these responses are rooted in acknowledging the historical context in which Black people suffered violence and abuse for even being rumored to have had a sexual relationship with a white person. This prompted Vy and Frank to caution their loved ones out of these relationships in hopes of protecting them from the violence. From these discussions, it becomes clear that interracial relationships in their media representations are a valid measure of social progress.

As a society, it becomes clear that race is still a cause for concern for those engaging in interracial relationships. The media representations depict how interracial relationships are generally perceived, and it is apparent here that class and historical factors remain immensely influential. They are influential not just in the perceptions of the relationships but also within the

relationship. This subsequently confirms interracial relationships as a valid measure of social progress and disputes the narrative of a post-racial society. It is apparent, that if anything, race is pervasive.

## **Exploration of Race Dynamics Within the Relationships**

### **Introduction:**

As seen in the media analysis, the concept of race in interracial relationships presents great nuance to not only those around but those in the relationships. The repeated sentiments of color-blindness and true love painted a very Black and white portrayal of interracial relationships. To look more intently at the challenges presented in interracial relationships, I conducted interviews with people in long-term interracial relationships. I asked them about the highs and lows in their relationships. And in these interviews, some unique attributes of some interracial relationships come to light that makes interracial relationships as a measure of social progress incredibly efficient and further deny the idea of the post-racial era.

From the interviews, the greatest take away is that those in interracial relationships face a unique set of problems that those in intra-racial relationships cannot, or at least not to the same extent. These distinctive concerns include limitations in dating pools, problematic familial responses and relationships, ideological and political differences, and pervasive discussions about biracial children. In summary, they largely center on aspects of systemic racism and implicit bias; and these aspects are so significant that even the most socially conscious people in interracial relationships are forced to confront internalized racism every day in their most initiated relationship.

### **Methods:**

The interviews themselves consisted of about 20 pre-written questions that were also inspired by the previously discussed work of Erica Childs.<sup>37</sup> The questions asked about the participants' upbringing, with questions about demographic information, dating history, and

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<sup>37</sup> Childs, Erica Chito. "Looking behind the Stereotypes of the 'Angry Black Woman': An Exploration of Black Women's Responses to Interracial Relationships." *Gender and Society* 19, no. 4 (2005): 544–61. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30044616>.

faith/belief systems. The questions also asked specific responses about perceptions of their interracial relationship with questions about friends and family, concerns about bi-racial children, and individual attitudes towards interracial relationships.

Because I did interview people I knew personally, I changed the names in the discussion of the trends, to protect their privacy. It is also important to mention that I exclusively interview people in cisgender, heterosexual monogamous relationships. This was done to better isolate the impacts of race in these relationships. Relationships outside of those classifications present other sources of nuance that would only conflate with race. However, this is an ideal space for further research and study on the overall influence of interracial relationships.

A snowball sampling technique was used to recruit participants for my research. I conducted a total of six surveys and many of whom I knew personally. All the relationships had been going on for at least 2 years and most of the couples were married. 3 of the interviews had white women and Black men and the other 3 had Black women and white women. All participants were between the ages of early 20s to late 50s, with most participants being in their late 20s and early 30s. This was not selected for but ultimately gave variety in the interview responses. I interviewed only one member for 4 of the relationships. However, there were 2 interviews where both members of the relationship were in attendance. The interviews all took place virtually, as many of the participants were spaced out all over the United States. They were also informal with the longest interview lasting 1.5 hours and the shortest interview lasting about 45 minutes.

### Upbringing and Demographic

Many of the couples I interviewed came from either diverse environments or environments devoid of diversity. Many of the Black interviewees specifically Ally, Charles, and

Elizabeth reported being in predominantly white spaces for much of their adolescence. For both Ally and Beth, their interracial relationships were the first relationships that either of them had. Both women are married to white men and before this, they hadn't dated anyone let alone anyone outside of their race. Ally had grown up in Georgia where she attended a predominantly (more than 50%) white school and white church. She met her husband Dan through her white church when they were both in the youth group. They have been inseparable since. Much of the same is also true for Beth.

However, Beth and Travis met whilst they were both in seminary. Beth told me that her seminary had very few Black men in them, and all of them were married. The similarities present in both Ally and Beth's stories suggest that for many Black women, dating white men comes as a matter of opportunity. Both Ally and Beth recall being attracted to and wanting to date Black men, but those men did not return the interest or weren't available. Both women, to a degree, were a matter of their circumstances. And this concept is not exclusive to Black women. Tyler, a Black man aged 26, also reported growing up in a predominantly white community. He originally met his girlfriend Jane when they were in high school, although they did not formally get together until years after.

On the other hand, however, this did not hold constant for the white members of the relationship. The white counterparts often grew up in racially and ethnically diverse communities. Melissa a white woman in her early 30s, reported living in a community that had a strong Latinx and Black presence. Travis described a similar upbringing. This is not to say that either of them lived in communities in which white people were the minority. It does mean, however, that as far as options for dating, they were not entirely limited to people in their race by their geographic location. This trend is unique because it displays the significance in which one's



physical location impacts their dating choices. And this is not a new understanding. Researchers have long attributed this to the fact that with industrialization to the fact that people were living in areas of greater racial difference. Areas like Denver's Little 5 Points that once were historically Black populations, see more white and Latin people and are no longer predominantly Black. This is demonstrative of the conditions that encourage interracial dating and is evident by the reported conditions of my interviewees.

In essence, there is a positive correlation between interracial relationships and the demographic of the upbringing of the participants. In this regard, interracial relationships as a measure of social progress are relevant in that it is suggestive of the racial variety present in various communities. However, as many instances previously discussed, the Black participants who grew up in predominantly white neighborhoods draw into question whether these people had a choice in selecting their romantic partners. This is partially rhetorical in that we know the interviewees selected and adore their partners, but it draws the question of would still have been the same outcome had the Black counterparts had greater exposure to people of color, and specifically other Black people? From this, it is impossible to ignore the factor of geography as it relates to the prevalence and motivation behind interracial relationships.

### Familial Responses and Class

In the interviews I conducted, the only consistency in the familial response was about their socioeconomic status. Put differently, in a dynamic of interracial relationships, the low-income family tended to have more objections to the relationship. The wealthier family often had a better relationship with their in-law and were more involved in their regular lives. For instance, in an interview with Melissa, she acknowledged the issues of the class despite their families being so similar in their respective tax brackets. Melissa grew up in a two-parent

household, despite having a distant father. She attended public school and was able to go to college. Her husband Derek, however, was in and out of foster homes and did not have access to resources like Melissa. This has not impacted their relationship as much as it has impacted their family's relationship with them.

When Melissa began to come around Derek's family, there were concerns that Melissa wouldn't fit in well with the family dynamic and when she declined to partake in some of their traditions like drinking, smoking, and gambling, there were sentiments that she was trying to be better than them. Alison quoted one of Derek's family members who said, "Well if you are going to be one of us, you have to do what we do". Drawing that line between Melissa and their family, reinforced that Melissa was indeed not considered a member of the family. The class component is evident as much as the race component, because of the idea that Melissa was trying to be better than them. It was the sentiment that she is too good to do what "we do". In this right, a component that was partly about race became more about class and was a means to further exclude Melissa.

As previously mentioned, class is a variable that is not restricted by race. Beth and Travis experienced circumstances that confirm this finding. Beth, a Black woman, came from a middle-class household in which her mother was a nurse, and her father was a physician. Travis came from a poorer household, in which he was the first in his family to attend college. During the interview, Travis noted that he was the first in his family to marry out of their tax bracket. In this dynamic, like Melissa and Derek, Travis' family did not embrace Beth. Beth does not have a relationship with Travis' family. She went to the extent of blocking her mother-in-law on Facebook. During the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, Travis's mom would post and reshare problematic videos and opinions that slandered the protestors. Before this, she had also posted a

host of anti-immigration opinions and ideals. When Beth confronted her, she could not understand the connection between her posts and the fact that her daughter-in-law is a Black woman. This is what prompted the blocking.

Unlike Melissa and Derek, the concern is not entirely that Beth thinks she is “better” than them. Rather, it is a disconnect in social and political values. This is largely attributed to class and even education level. Travis acknowledged that his family has not valued higher education and has very different approaches to understanding the current political arena. Travis has said that his family does not hate or dislike Beth but rather simply acknowledges her. There wasn’t a huge effort to make her/include her as a part of the family. This was seen in Melissa and Derek’s case and understanding the role that class and education level play, make this trend interesting. Within my research, I have found that poorer families tend to have less education and more objections/conflict with their partners from the wealthier family. Wealthier families tend to be more educated and more welcoming of their partners from the poorer family.

This phenomenon of class being a defining component that better predicts attitudes towards interracial relationships, can in part be explained through exchange theory. This was previously discussed in the first chapter with many familial concerns expressed in the media depictions having to do with the other partner's ability to alleviate stress and provide. Take for instance the Fresh Prince of Bel-Air example, when Aunt Vy is concerned about Janice’s relationship was largely rooted in understanding Janice’s social positioning and concerned that marrying a white man would only exacerbate their concerns<sup>38</sup>. This give-and-take mentality is an example of exchange theory. Exchange theory in relationships suggests when people are dating, they do so with the intent to gain something. This includes intangible and tangible

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<sup>38</sup> Fresh Prince of Bel Air, Season 2, Episode 6

commodities like companionship, wealth, status, etc.<sup>39</sup>. With both parties looking to gain, a sort of exchange happens.

Exchange theory accounts for the differences in class perceptions of interracial relationships. It shows that families understand what they and their children can bring to the relationship and what they hope to gain. It also has roots in perceptions of class and status. Put differently, poorer families reject interracial relationships because they see the racial difference as a potential burden that detracts from the individual worth. This is seen in Vy's concerns and Derek and Melissa's relationship. Derek's family was much poorer than Melissa's, in addition to being Black and largely unstable. Melissa and her actions were often seen as "stuck up", and they magnified her differences as a means of rejecting her.

In this discussion, Melissa's whiteness is not enough and because whiteness is a property that inherently advances white people, it is often seen as a commodity<sup>40</sup>. Melissa's wealth and her whiteness were not equal. In this instance, however, perceptions of Melissa's status follow the "she thinks she is better than us" sentiment. This magnifies the cultural differences and makes Derek's family feel as though he had more to lose than to gain from being with Melissa. The loss, in this instance, of cultural capital. Because Melissa doesn't smoke, gamble, or have the same taste in music, she cannot be one of them. On top of that, she becomes viewed as an opposition to them, and this gives them the motive to reject her despite being married and having a child with Derek. Put differently, what Melissa brought to the table in terms of whiteness, she takes in her cultural differences.

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<sup>39</sup> Rosenfeld, Michael J. "A Critique of Exchange Theory in Mate Selection." *American Journal of Sociology* 110, no. 5 (2005): 1284–1325. <https://doi.org/10.1086/428441>.

<sup>40</sup> Harris, Cheryl I. "white ness as Property." *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1707–91. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1341787>.

This begs the question of why is whiteness not enough here? Especially in settings where wealth is scarce, culture and family are invaluable, especially for Black people. Loss of culture can be affiliated with loss of family. Black families and families from underserved populations largely relate to and embrace one another through culture, music, hobbies, traditions, etc<sup>41</sup>. This is not to say that they do not value tangible wealth and resources, but they value other things like culture much more. Therefore, it is not enough that Melissa is white and can bring that privilege in. Ultimately, this is not a space that needed or demanded whiteness as wealth.

The phenomena are reinforced inversely, in Beth and Travis's relationship. Beth, a Black woman, came from a significantly wealthier family than Travis. However, this example is not just about exchange theory, because Exchange theory says that Beth's wealth should compensate for the fact that she is Black and make her more desirable<sup>42</sup>. But Travis acknowledges that he was the first in his family to pursue higher education. He also acknowledges that they are difficult to get through regarding new information about race. Higher education, especially a humanities education is often linked to being more socially accepting of different people<sup>43</sup>. From here, it is fair that Travis' ability to understand their previously held racist and racially insensitive remarks beliefs target Beth. To rephrase, they are not as open to and accepting of Beth largely because they do not know any better. Her wealth cannot account for the fact that is Black and their anti-Black sentiments overpower their ability to have a genuine and meaningful connection with Beth.

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<sup>41</sup> Dilworth-Anderson, Peggye, Linda M. Burton, and William L. Turner. "The Importance of Values in the Study of Culturally Diverse Families." *Family Relations* 42, no. 3 (1993): 238–42. <https://doi.org/10.2307/585551>.

<sup>42</sup> Rosenfeld, Michael J. "A Critique of Exchange Theory in Mate Selection." *American Journal of Sociology*

<sup>43</sup> Chavoshi, Amir, and Hodjat Hamidi. "Social, Individual, Technological and Pedagogical Factors Influencing Mobile Learning Acceptance in Higher Education: A Case from Iran." *Telematics and Informatics* 38 (May 2019): 133–65. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tele.2018.09.007>.

There is room for a discussion on gender in exchange theory as well. Because men have the patriarchy, and subsequent social privilege, women may be expected to bring more to the table to offset the difference. A man simply needs to be a man, while women often need to know special skills, be especially attractive, or have some sort of commodity to measure up. Melissa is white and well educated and that was still not enough for Derek's family. Beth is Black but is from a wealthy family and is well-educated. Even with these special qualities, the families find means to reject them, and this is largely a product of family traditions and values.

In summary, the socioeconomic status appears to be the most important contributing factor in predicting and analyzing familiar responses to interracial relationships. Melissa and Beth have unique attributes that they bring to their respective relationships. And yet with these attributes, they are still not embraced by their spouses' families. Exchange theory understands that these families value things like culture and cognitive similarities more than some of the more tangible commodities each person brings to their relationships.

#### Light Skin and Pretty Eyes: Racialized Beauty Standards and Conversations about Children

A motivator for most people to get into relationships is having children, and this is seen most especially in interracial relationships. In Dr. Stewart's, Black Women, Black Love, Stewart recounts an instance where a Black pro-football player and his white wife are hosting a party<sup>44</sup>. Other Black football players and their white girlfriends and wives are in attendance, and when making a toast, the host says, "and here's to no more dark skin babies". Interracial couples are often first and foremost aware of the fact that their offspring would fit more comfortably within a beauty standard than the offspring of Black parents and white parents respectively. This concept is by no means a new one, and we see this in the interviews. Numerous couples including

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<sup>44</sup> Stewart, Dianne M. *Black Women, Black Love: America's War on African American Marriage*. 71-72. New York: Seal Press, 2020.

Melissa and Derek and Ally and Dan stated that the appearance of their offspring was something they acknowledged in their relationship. Melissa recounted hoping that her son would have her eyes so that he would at least in part look like her, as she was concerned that he would solely look like his father. She also, however, remarked that babies with “light skin and pretty eyes” were cute ``.

This is a unique concept because it draws into question, what about biracial people that make them more attractive? Is it the Black features on fair skin, or white features on dark skin? Ultimately it points to a beauty standard that favors aspects of Blackness when fragmented and less so in its origin. So undeniably Black people are less attractive than people who are Black and white, and this is because Blackness is so far outside of the European beauty standards from which these ideas of “cute” are coming. By “diluting” Blackness in an interracial relationship, the offspring is already expected to be more palatable and socially attractive. This presents a motive for some to get into and procreate in interracial relationships.

And it isn’t just the child’s appearance that encourages interracial relationships, it is also the child’s racial identity that is a point of conversation. Most of the interviews discussed the ways that they would encourage their literal or potential children to express their identity. Melissa, despite being white, displayed an understanding of her son's race and how he would be identified in the world. I had concerns that she might have been lessening the child’s ability to identify their whiteness. This prompted a conversation about how she feels that she can relate to her son. She expressed that she wished her son had her eye color so that she wouldn’t look entirely like his family. She said that her younger sister, who also married outside of her race, had people claim that her children did not look like her. But because Melissa’s son is still very young and subsequently fair-skinned, she said that she hasn’t run into the same concern.

Melissa's conversation about her child's appearance acknowledges the role of aesthetic and beauty standards in procreating. Concerns about how the child will look are common for all parents, but in interracial relationships, there is an added layer of understanding the child's identity and how this alters their relationship to the world around them. The most common concern was about the child showing up as Black and the implications for that. This provokes a discussion about the one-drop rule<sup>45</sup>. This rule comes from the Jim Crow Era in which "colored people" were defined as having even one drop of Black blood<sup>46</sup>. Even the terminology, biracial, aims to attempt to quantify the Blackness in one's blood. The need to quantify and identify Black and white children with their Blackness, even when they are white-passing, is an ideal rooted in white supremacy. In the conversation of cute kids, it is the understanding that Blackness is unattractive but when combined with whiteness is made more attractive. It is the whiteness that is the redeeming quality in that it allows for the Blackness to be disguised. This speaks to the anti-Black sentiment of the obsession with interracial kids.

Tyler and Jane had different concerns when addressing the identity of their potential children. Tyler reported in his interview that when he and Jane were having conversations about race, the most prominent spark was the thought of having kids or the reality that their proverbial kids would have. Tyler said that in response to headlines of police brutality against Black people, Jane has gotten emotional and has made remarks like, "I don't know what I'd do if that happened to her son." Tyler said that her family reacted similarly with her mom remarking that she wouldn't let anyone mistreat her proverbial grandchild. In this context, bi-racial children present social concerns, many of which many white people are hyper-aware.

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<sup>45</sup> Khanna, Nikki. "IF YOU'RE HALF Black, YOU'RE JUST Black': Reflected Appraisals and the Persistence of the One-Drop Rule." *The Sociological Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (2010): 96–121. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20697932>.

<sup>46</sup> Literary Hub. "How the 'One Drop Rule' Became a Tool of white Supremacy," February 22, 2021. <https://lithub.com/how-the-one-drop-rule-became-a-tool-of-white-supremacy/>



In the context of Black parents having a Black child, understanding the reality of Blackness that the child will be born into is well discussed and highly regarded<sup>47</sup>. This, however, simultaneously confirms interracial relationships as a valid measure of social progress and debunks the idea of the present being identified as being the post-racial era. Because Melissa's family places much emphasis on the race of an unborn child, it becomes clear that there is a hyper-awareness of the negative implications of race. Not only are they aware that the child will be Black, at least in part, but they are aware of what that Blackness can mean as far as how that child is treated. These conversations are common and frequent in Black relationships. However, seeing them in this space of interracial relationships is particularly interesting because the guise of the post-racial era insists that these conversations do not need to happen, or simply do not happen. Understanding that these conversations do happen, and do so, so easily, demonstrates that there is a racial awareness and that interracial relationships provide a platform for them. In this regard, interracial relationships illustrate the genuine nature of conversations of the race currently taking place.

### Conclusion:

Even though all the interview subjects came from varying walks of life, their stories aligned in the discussion of class. In Abby and Dan, Beth and Travis showed that the environment in which they grew up encouraged them to be in interracial relationships. Beth and Abby both grew up in predominantly white neighborhoods, while Dan and Travis both grew up in more racially diverse neighborhoods. This inherently encouraged them to enter interracial relationships. Jane and Tyler and Melissa and Derek and their families had intentional

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<sup>47</sup> Anderson, Leslie A., Margaret O'Brien Caughy, and Margaret T. Owen. "'The Talk' and Parenting While Black in America: Centering Race, Resistance, and Refuge." *Journal of Black Psychology*, (July 2021). <https://doi.org/10.1177/00957984211034294>.

conversations about the race of their children. But nothing was consistent regarding their perceptions and concerns within their relationship was class.

Dan, Beth, Jane, and Melissa all came from higher-income families than their partners and subsequently had families that were more accepting of their partners and their relationships in general. When considering the mate exchange theory and the understanding that higher-income people tend to be more educated and subsequently more socially accepting, these variables make sense together. All this information, however, was crucial to a deeper understanding of the dynamics within interracial relationships. This ultimately showcases how interracial relationships can be a measure of social progress and show that race is pervasive even in our most intimate spaces. From here, there is a weaker argument for the concept of the post-racial era, and it becomes clear from these relationship dynamics that race is still an influential concern, for more than just those in the relationship.

## **Survey Findings: Popular Feelings about Race**

### **Introduction:**

This chapter analyzes the responses and discusses the trends from the said analysis. Said trends largely include correlations between upbringing and comfort dating outside one's race. Low reports of ethnically diverse upbringings were correlated with low reports of comfort in dating outside of one's race. Another prominent trend was that many of the reasons given for embracing interracial dating, like "true love" or "race doesn't matter", are replicants of aspects of the previously discussed color-blind sentiments. Finally, a trend that was prominent in the research was the factor of age in understanding perceptions of interracial relationships. Many respondents said that interracial relationships were less accepted by older people and more embraced by younger people. This trend had a lot of layers considering that it was an open-ended question in which many people chose to unpack their reasoning. Discussing these trends will ultimately suggest that despite the social progress some respondents presume has been made, there are still influences of racism in our most intimate relationships.

### **Methods:**

To look at the current state of interracial relationships today in a way that was different than previously discussed, I distributed surveys to my peers. The survey consisted of 20 questions that interrogated the social environment, dating preferences, and racial perceptions of the participants. Many of the questions asked participants to rank choices on a scale from 1 to 5, or outright select the option that most closely aligned with them. Microsoft Forms was used to create, administer, and analyze the survey results.

The survey questions, like the interview questions, were formulated with insight from Jane Doering's work.<sup>48</sup> It can be broken into three main components; the first being demographic information. This information asked about the participant's age, gender, sexual orientation, race, current relationship status, and geographic location. To maintain consistency with the requirements of the interviews, the survey excluded data from people who did not identify as heterosexual. As discussed in the previous chapter, this is done with the understanding that interracial dating looks different and has different social implications when sexual orientation is not held constant. The second section gathered information on the social environment and dating history. This section included questions that asked participants to rank how ethnically diverse their upbringing was. This survey also asked participants to rank how comfortable they would be dating outside of their race and dating specifically Black people. The third and final section was all about perceptions of race and interracial relationships. It is important to note that the questions focused largely on the individual desire to be in an interracial relationship. There is a minor focus on outside perceptions of interracial relationships. It asked about the reasoning behind dating outside of one's race and created space for an explanation of the respondents' answers.

To distribute the survey, I shared the link on my social media, in group chats I was a part of, and urged my friends to do the same. The survey was available for about 1 month before I stopped sharing the link. I received 103 responses from my peers whose ages ranged from 18 to 32 and were geographically spread across the continental United States. Overwhelmingly, the study included responses from most women, with 74 respondents being women and 26

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<sup>48</sup> Doering, Jan. "A Battleground of Identity: Racial Formation and the African American Discourse on Interracial Marriage." *Social Problems* 61, no. 4 (2014): 559–75. <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2014.13017>.

identifying as men. The survey participants were informed that the information they shared would be included in this research project and that they were under no obligation to partake.

The numerical data from the surveys were analyzed using Microsoft Excel's data analysis tools. This software allowed me to isolate variables and find trends. I primarily used descriptive statistics like the mean and performed a regression model on relevant factors. The regression model allows me to look at different variables and analyze how they relate or do not relate to one another. The regression model yielded, r values, p-values, t-stats, and other values, many of which were irrelevant or were not pertinent to this study. Many of the results displayed statistical insignificance, which will be further discussed later in this chapter. However, this was the primary and most optimal means of data analysis.

#### Findings: Demographic Information: How Identity Informs Understandings of Interracial Relationships

As previously mentioned, most of the participants were between ages 18 and 24 with most participants being 19 or 21 and the max-age being 32. The respondents are spread across the United States with most of the participants being in Colorado or Georgia. 62% of the respondents identified as African American, 26% of the respondent identified as white, 24% identified as Latino, 9.7% identified as Asian, and the rest identified as other. About 50% of all respondents reported being in some sort of romantic relationship, with about half of that percentage being in mixed-race relationships (i.e., Black, and Asian). However, only 8 respondents, about 15% of the respondents in relationships reported being in a relationship where one party was Black, and the other was white. This means that many of the trends identified in the study apply mainly to people outside of interracial relationships.

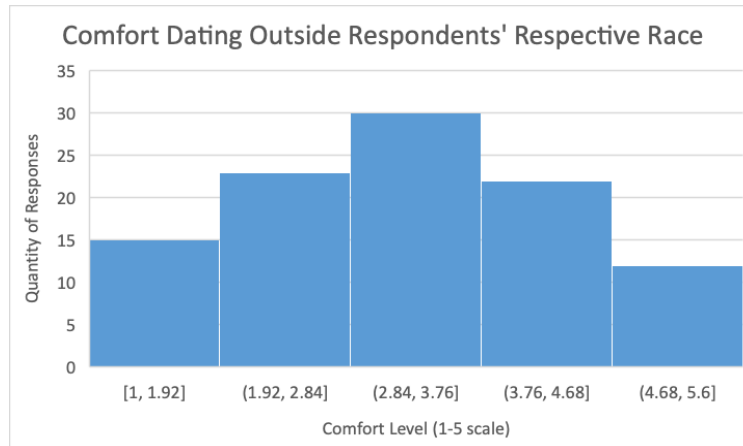


Figure 1

The racial demographic information was largely insignificant in identifying trends. To the question, on a scale from 1 to 5, how comfortable are you dating outside of your race, the study average was 3.74. 3 was neutral and 4 was generally comfortable. This number suggests a trend of general impartiality to interracial dating with a skew towards comfortable. However, Figure 1 above shows that more responses indicate a discomfort dating outside of their race as opposed to those that did. When the data was broken apart to focus on specifically Black respondents, the average response was 3.78 which is statistically like the general average. The average for white respondents was 3.8 which was also statistically insignificant. The only statistical impropriety was found in analyzing mixed-race respondents. These respondents were primarily Hispanic and white, and other various identities, which had a score of 3.2. This score was lower than that of other groups.

The lower average is, however, statistically insignificant. It yielded a p-value of 0.11, which is much larger than the confidence point of 0.05. Considering that much of the data saw no correlation or no statistical significance, however, this difference stands out, which makes it at least worth investigating. The fact that mixed-race respondents had lower average scores of comforts in interracial dating is suggestive of concerns with identity. These responses lean more

neutral than the larger study and are interesting when considering that biracial people, especially in this age range tend to struggle with identity.<sup>49</sup> Identifying who is outside their race is inherently a point of contention, so it makes sense that this population out of all the respondents would present disinterest in dating outside of their race. Put differently, people with multiple racial and ethnic identities often struggle to adequately align their identities, and they often struggle to get validation from members of their identities.

The discomfort of mixed-race people dating outside of their race can be interpreted because of historically embedded principles like the one-drop rule that was discussed in the previous chapter. It often aligns biracial people with one identity over another<sup>50</sup>. Because there are complications within their own identity, dating outside their race can be understood to have some hesitations. And this reasoning is fortified in research done on people of biracial heritage. A study from Chandra Waring<sup>51</sup> in which she interviewed biracial people about their dating preferences, found that their preferences were more in line with the community that they were raised in, as opposed to aligning their interests with their own identities. This is confirmation of my findings, in that mixed-race respondents expressed less comfort in dating outside of their race than other races.

While the racial demographic information appeared to be relatively insignificant, there was some significance found for the age of the respondent and upbringing. In a regression model

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<sup>49</sup> For more information about adolescent challenges with identity formation, Pfeifer JH, Berkman ET. The Development of Self and Identity in Adolescence: Neural Evidence and Implications for a Value-Based Choice Perspective on Motivated Behavior. *Child Dev Perspect.* 2018;12(3):158-164. doi:10.1111/cdep.12279

<sup>50</sup> For more insight on the one-drop, see Khanna, Nikki. "IF YOU'RE HALF Black, YOU'RE JUST Black': Reflected Appraisals and the Persistence of the One-Drop Rule." *The Sociological Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (2010): 96–121. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20697932>.

<sup>51</sup> Waring, Chandra D. L. "‘They See Me as Exotic... That Intrigues Them:’ Gender, Sexuality, and the Racially Ambiguous Body." *Race, Gender & Class* 20, no. 3/4 (2013): 299–317. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43496947>.

that compared the age of the respondent the participant and the comfort in dating outside of their race, the p-value was 0.03 which indicates statistical significance. The R-value yielded was 0.24. This number is low and positive, which indicates a weak yet positive correlation. This ultimately suggests that as the respondents' age increases, so does the comfort in dating outside of their race. Many variables must be considered when looking at these numbers. The primary age group is 18-24, so in context, this number means that people who are 24 feel slightly more comfortable dating outside of their race than those that are 18. This can be understood because of personal development and growth, and a reflection of general dating comfort.<sup>52</sup>

In the responses to the diverse upbringing question, there was no correlation to comfort dating outside of one's race. This is contrary to previous research that identified that people in more diverse environments were more likely to be in interracial relationships.<sup>53</sup> This can be accounted for, however, in that the understanding of the term diversity is immensely subjective. Also, diverse upbringings simply mean greater exposure to people different from the respondents, it does not speak to the quality of that exposure.

These various instances in which the demographic information does not influence the responses are suggestive of the fact that various variables impact sentiments surrounding interracial dating. The evidence shows that no one factor can be used to predict how respondents feel about dating outside their race. This is a testament to how dating and dating preferences are largely subjective. Everyone has different experiences with those around them that ultimately shape their likes and dislikes. Human beings are a culmination of their environment and

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<sup>52</sup> Meier A, Allen G. Romantic Relationships from Adolescence to Young Adulthood: Evidence from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. *Social Q.* 2009;50(2):308-335. doi:10.1111/j.1533-8525.2009.01142.x

<sup>53</sup> Garcia, Ginny E., Richard Lewis, and Joanne Ford-Robertson. "Attitudes Regarding Laws Limiting Black-white Marriage: A Longitudinal Analysis of Perceptions and Related Behaviors." *Journal of Black Studies* 46, no. 2 (2015): 199–217. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24572944>.



experiences and the lack of correlations in the original research demonstrates just that. This ultimately supports the idea of interracial relationships as a measure of social progress, in that sentiments around it showcases the variety in the society. Interracial dating is no longer looked at as objectionably bad or good, and the research supports this. Put differently, there are mixed feelings around entering interracial relationships, and this is a valid measure of social progress in that it is accurate.

Discussion: Reasoning for Opposing and Supporting Interracial Relationships

Understanding that the demographic information did not help interpret respondents, makes individual reasoning for sentiments even more valuable. The survey asked questions about why people would get into interracial relationships themselves. It allowed participants to rank the following reasons: Fear of conflict within

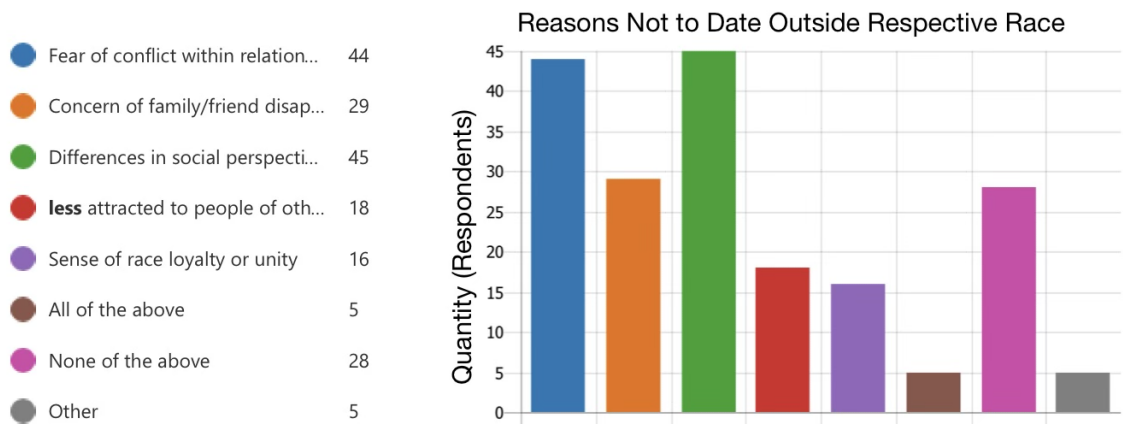


Figure 2

a relationship, Concern of family/friend disappointment, differences in social perspectives, less attraction to people of other races, sense of race loyalty or unity, all the above, None of the above and others. The pre-selected reasoning in this question was inspired by the findings of the Doering study.

As seen in the figure, the top 2 most selected responses were fear of conflict within the relationship and differences in social perspectives. This is consistent with the findings of the Doering study, in that concerns of racial tension within the relationship were frequently cited in the letters to the editor. The prevalence of respondents who selected these options suggests an understanding of the pervasiveness of race and racial tension. Concerns that interracial relationships will have conflict and differences in social perspective are largely implicative of the social awareness around them. These concerns being a barrier to interracial relationships for so many ultimately display a general awareness of the threat of disruption racism must intimate relationships.

It also suggests that for so many people the burden of dealing with racism is enough to prevent them from entering interracial romantic relationships. Conversations about race and racism are already uncomfortable and full of nuance. It only makes sense that people would have reservations about having their conversations in romantic relationships, where they are most vulnerable. Especially in the current political climate where conversations of

The race is highly politicized and often misrepresented, these difficult conversations can feel overwhelming.<sup>54</sup> It is also worth noting that for many, conversations about race are inflammatory and cause them to feel judged. This is especially true for white people in the United States. The term white fragility describes the sensitivity white people feel in conversations about race<sup>55</sup>. It describes the immense discomfort that some may feel that can even cause them to shut down and back out of these uncomfortable conversations. Romantic relationships for most people are a safe place to meet their most intimate needs. Conversations of

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<sup>54</sup> Appiah, Osei, William Eveland, Olivia Bullock, and Kathryn Coduto. "Why We Can't Talk Openly about Race: The Impact of Race and Partisanship on Respondents' Perceptions of Intergroup Conversations." *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 25, no. 2 (February 2022): 434–52. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430220967978>.

<sup>55</sup>For more information on white fragility, see DiAngelo, Robin. "white FRAGILITY." *Counterpoints* 497 (2016): 245–53. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45157307>.

race are incredibly difficult. It is no surprise that people do not want to feature these conversations in such a private relationship.

Additionally, it makes sense that people of color are concerned over differences in social perspective when oftentimes, in these situations, those differences can prove dangerous. Interracial relationships pose a different set of concerns for those who are systemically oppressed, in that confronting racism is confronting their lived experience. It is not up for debate, and it is not a conversation that can successfully or meaningfully be had without immense empathy and compassion. Being in a relationship where one partner does not see the other's experience as valid, is one where there is no respect for genuine understanding of the partner. This inherently cannot be a healthy, functioning relationship. This response acknowledges that there are risks in dating someone whose experience is so significantly different from their partner.

Conversely, the survey also asked participants to rank the following reasons why they would participate in an interracial relationship: true love, race is not a contributing factor, **more** attraction to people of other races, **also** attraction to people of other races, cultural appreciation/openness, making cute babies, all the above, none of the above, and other. The graphical breakdown of this is seen in Figure 3. The options for this question were also from the Doering study. In this question, the top two responses were “true love” and “cultural openness/appreciation”. While these sentiments are genuine and romantic, they can be interpreted through the lens of the color-blind sentiment. The true love sentiment acknowledges that relationships and subsequently love are a force so powerful that it can overcome even the horrors of racism, hence the romantic nature of the sentiment. In an ideal world, this would be true. But in a world where racism is prevalent, it is inescapable even in true love. To think

otherwise is in line with the color-blind sentiments; the sentiments that proclaim that race is irrelevant and that only one's humanity should be acknowledged.

The cultural openness/appreciation ideal is interesting because it provokes the need for context. It aligns itself with the “**also** attracted to people of other cultures'” sentiments. These ideals require an understanding of how it was shaped. Where is the openness and appreciation for cultures coming from? This likens itself to instances of cultural appropriation and the hyper-sexualization of Black women<sup>56</sup>. It is not to say that some people do not genuinely appreciate other cultures and are open-minded. However, it acknowledges those that are appreciative in problematic ways. Put differently, many times the answer to the question previously posed is because of stereotypes of other cultures, or because of what the culture aims to add.

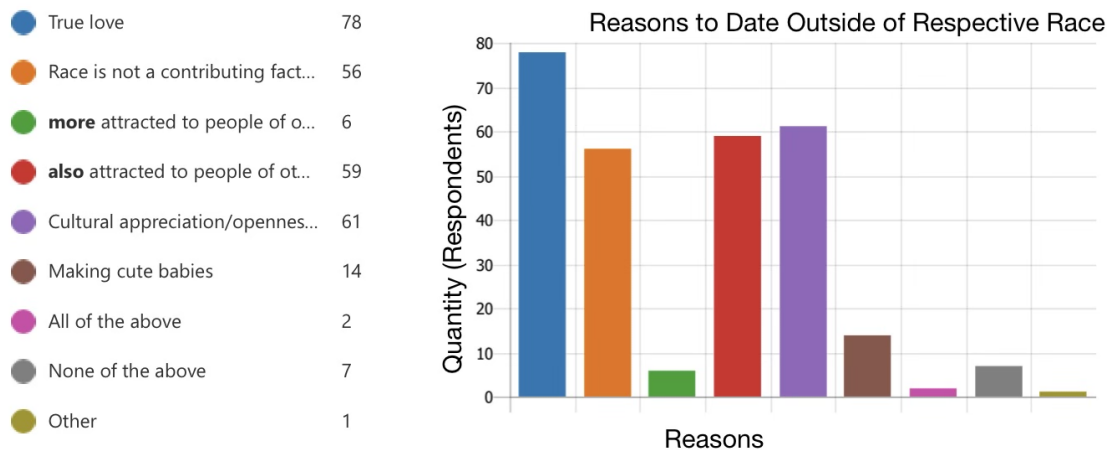


Figure 3

The reliance on the color-blind ideal is also seen in the other responses that say that race is not a contributing factor in romance. Many participants align themselves with the ideas and

<sup>56</sup> For more information on the fetishization of Black women, see Matthews, Annalycia. “Hyper-Sexualization of Black Women in the Media.” *Sociology Student Work Collection*, March 1, 2018. [https://digitalcommons.tacoma.uw.edu/gender\\_studies/22](https://digitalcommons.tacoma.uw.edu/gender_studies/22).

thoughts of the post-racial era.<sup>57</sup> People generally want to believe that because the era of Martin Luther King jr. and Malcolm X has passed, all people are equal. But as previously reinforced, when living in a racialized society, the ideal is ignorant. Understanding racism as a system recognizes the colorblind appeal as dismissive of the experiences of Black people.

The survey responses to the reasoning behind supporting or opposing interracial relationships confirm the running idea that interracial relationships are efficient measures of social progress. The ranking of the reasoning shows exactly what people are thinking when they express sentiments of support or disapproval. It shows what resonates and what people find themselves most strongly aligned with. This illustrates the way that so many think and feel about interracial relationships. It is also worth acknowledging that the sentiments expressed also align with previously held social beliefs which show that attitudes have not changed as much if people feel the same way as people did in the 1960s.<sup>58</sup> In summation, the reasoning behind supporting and opposing interracial marriages showcases that attitude toward interracial relationships is an efficient means of understanding social progress.

#### Discussion continued: Unscripted Opinions about Perceptions of Interracial Relationships

Beyond understanding interracial relationships from the perspective of the quantitative data, the qualitative data has valuable insight into the respective and uncensored ideals held by respondents. In this final section, I will unpack the survey questions in which respondents were able to respond to their thoughts about interracial relationships. The final question asked in the survey, asked participants whether they believe the public is accepting of Interracial

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<sup>57</sup> For a deeper explanation on the post-racial era sentiment, see Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. "The Structure of Racism in Color-Blind, 'Post-Racial' America." *American Behavioral Scientist* 59, no. 11 (October 2015): 1358–76. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764215586826>.

<sup>58</sup> For more information on the social beliefs in the 1960s, see Hoewe, Jennifer, and Geri Alumit Zeldes. "Overturning Anti-Miscegenation Laws: News Media Coverage of the Lovings' Legal Case Against the State of Virginia." *Journal of Black Studies* 43, no. 4 (2012): 427–43. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23215224>.

relationships, and why. In this question, many participants left detailed responses about their experiences and their opinions. These responses provided the context to their thoughts and feelings expressed in the qualitative data. The sentiments are largely anecdote and familial but display a trend that says that sentiments concerning interracial relationships are largely personal. The fact that so many anecdotes are family-based shows the magnitude of that influence on how people choose to participate in interracial relationships.

Of the responses received, many of them reference familial histories and show the contrast between then and now. In response to a question about why people are more accepting of interracial relationships, a 21-year-old mixed-race female reported, “My grandparents were a Black and white couple in Chicago in the 60s. Needless to say, they went through hell to be together, but they persevered because they were undoubtedly in love. There still are plenty of people that will have something to say about dating outside your race, but people are not being targeted and harassed like they used to.” This sentiment speaks largely to the true love ideal previously unpacked but also to the value of family history in shaping sentiments concerning interracial relationships. Because this individual had a front-row seat to an interracial relationship. This individual heard first-hand testimony about the trials and tribulations that their grandparents experienced, and so they are sensitive to interracial relationships as a concept in a different way than other people. This is not a new idea but to see how it manifests in real life is valuable. Human interactions shape human ideals, and this is a great depiction of it.

An example of the inverse ways in which first-hand interactions with interracial relationships shaped one’s response then comes from a 25-year-old Black female. She reported, “My Ghanaian parents LOVE the idea of marrying a white man or a rich non-Black man. They glamorize mixed kids which is toxic. On the other hand, some people think that mixing up is

“tarnishing” the racial gene of your ancestry.” This understanding is different from the one that was previously expressed in that it comes from a more negative depiction of interracial marriages. Romanticizing relationships like this especially between Black and immigrant families are often rooted in colorism. This is the idea that the lighter someone's skin is, the better their chances of succeeding in life.<sup>59</sup> In a racialized society, this sentiment thrives, and it is empirically shown to be a factor in opportunities and experiences granted to people of color. As a result of this, it becomes a motive for some to get into interracial relationships. There are real benefits to having the white privilege of being adjacent to whiteness, and the Ghanaian parents in this instance are aware of them. The desire to capitalize on it, at the very least, is understandable.

Many of the responses also featured the understanding that despite time passing, anti-Black sentiments pre-vail and interracial relationships. One of the respondents said, “Compared to 50 years ago, people are certainly more accepting. However, certain pairings are more accepted than others. Generally, within the Black community, people are more accepting of a Black man with someone of another race than a Black woman in an interracial relationship. I think this stems from community ideas that Black men should be allowed to do whatever they want, but Black women should be under Black men. It’s pretty terrible.” This response came from a 23-year-old Black female and the research supports her claims. She is right, just over 50 years ago interracial marriage was against the law. It was punishable by incarceration and in many instances lynching. That is not the case today, but this respondent also acknowledges that just because people are no longer being lynched in these relationships does not mean these relationships are devoid of anti-Blackness.

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<sup>59</sup> See information about colorism and financial success in Devaraj, Srikant, Narda R. Quigley, and Pankaj C. Patel. “The Effects of Skin Tone, Height, and Gender on Earnings.” *PLoS ONE* 13, no. 1 (January 2, 2018): e0190640. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0190640>.

This respondent expands upon her conversation when she talks about the gendered understandings of interracial relationships. This very understanding is reinforced by the literature. In the previous chapter, the concept of the “unmarriable Black men ” was unpacked, and it was evident that there is leniency if not an expectation for a portion of Black men to intentionally and exclusively date outside their race. Also, Dr. Dianna Stewart’s, Black Love, Black Women, details this exact phenomenon in which there is a double standard held for interracial dating for Black women. Stewart acknowledges that Black women are often ridiculed for dating outside their race because of concerns over race loyalty.<sup>60</sup> Put differently, these respondent sentiments are salient within the research and align with the understood social positioning of Black women.

#### Limitations:

The data from my research, while valuable to contribute to the scholarly discourse, has some inherent limitations. The findings from my research can largely be attributed to the sample size. My sample for the survey was just over 100 people and while this is still valuable data, the larger the sample size the stronger the conclusions can be. The lack of skew in the data can also be attributed to the fact that other factors like class were not taken into account. The interview analysis conducted in the previous chapter showed that class was a key contributing factor to attitudes surrounding interracial relationships. Had class been considered in the survey, it is fair to speculate that there may have been connections. Finally, a potential limitation to this data analysis is the fact that the majority of my participants were Black women, who were geographically spread out across the United States, with a variety of backgrounds. The data could have been made stronger if the participants came from similar backgrounds and geography

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<sup>60</sup> Stewart, Dianne M. *Black Women, Black Love: America’s War on African American Marriage*. 12-13. New York: Seal Press, 2020.



in the United States. These limitations are considerations for future replications, and aid in the understanding of my findings.

Conclusion: What does this all mean about love?

The sentiments expressed and elaborated in this survey provided meaningful insight that validates interracial relationships as a measure of social progress. The questions provoked meaningful insight. The demographic information shed insight on how it does not play a significant role in how people think about interracial relationships. Race and age are not nearly as impactful as experiences and exposure in how people form opinions and ideas about interracial relationships. In addition, understanding the reasoning that people have for holding these ideals is very telling about the factors that encourage these relationships. Finally, the unscripted responses provide insight into respective and individual ideals. Holistically, the surveys provide insight into the frequency in which different ideas are held and why. The biggest takeaways are that interracial relationships are largely a point of contention. People support or disapprove of them for valid reasons, and it is largely unpredictable. Romantically, this is in line with the nature of love. People do not choose whom they love. But this study shows that many people are at least aware of the way race can complicate that.

### **Conclusion: Social Progress and Interracial Relationships: Where Do We Go from Here?**

When measuring and understanding social progress in a heavily racialized society, race relations become a crucial medium. They are the lens through which attitudes and perceptions of Black and white people can be seen in Black and white. A step beyond examining mere race interactions is looking specifically at interracial romantic relationships. Who we love is incredibly personal, and seldom are we in control of whom we are drawn? Understanding love is a compulsion, that makes interracial relationships phenomena. It suggests the lengths that individuals are invested in overcoming to satisfy the desire for romance. The personal and social differences present in an interracial relationship show the complexities that shape said relationship.

To participate in these relationships is to elect to be in relationships riddled with unique challenges, challenges that in theory are unnecessary. The reasoning behind choosing such a

complex relationship to participate in is subsequently worthy of its discipline of study. Why would anyone choose to exacerbate the complexities of their most intimate private relationships? Ideally, for no other reason than the phenomena of love. This isn't to say that there are no other reasons for which people get into interracial relationships. But in an ideal, romantic sense, people choose to fight the odds and face potential social and familial rejection for a genuine connection. It is an act of rebellion against the social principles and contentions that encourage them to seek other partners rather than to participate in interracial relationships.

However, in a heavily racialized society, interracial relationships could never just be about love. In a society where whiteness is a property and a privilege, interracial relationships provide a platform for social inequalities to be highlighted. These inequalities can present problems in the individual's ability to relate and empathize with one another's experiences. Race as a dynamic within interracial relationships cannot be ignored, in as much as individual identities within the relationship need to be validated and celebrated. Because interracial relations are plagued with the burden of racial inequalities, it may be difficult to see past them to embrace love.

#### Strengths and Weaknesses:

My original research was designed to address the attitudes and perceptions of interracial relationships. I was initially curious about the motivations people had for engaging in these relationships, and for helping them tackle the challenges. To address this, my research consisted of an analysis of media depictions of interracial relationships, interviews with participants of interracial relationships, and a survey of a general population. In this research, interracial relationships were used as a measure of social progress, in that they were interpreted to reflect general sentiments about race. As seen in the research, sentiments are difficult to predict, but

there is a trend seen with class, in that wealthier families tend to be more accepting of the relationship than the poorer family. This insight reinforced interracial relationships as an adequate measure of social progress and subsequently, refuted the narrative of a post-racial society.

My research is strengthened by the limitations imposed on data analysis. Only data from heterosexual respondents was used to account for conflating variables of sexuality. The research was limited, however, by the failure to account for class and socioeconomic factors in the survey. This failure limited the ability to further conclusions made in the interview chapter, in the survey chapter. Without this data, the identification of class as a predictive variable about attitudes concerning interracial relationships is not as valid and reinforced as it had the potential to be. Should this study be replicated, that is an incredibly important consideration that needs to be made.

#### Findings:

In the media analysis component, there was an immense focus on the outside perceptions and stereotypes of interracial relationships that belittled the genuine experiences. Here, I unpacked episodes from Black sitcoms from the early 1990s that explicitly discussed interracial relationships. Some of these episodes required historical context to properly analyze. It revealed that many people acknowledged that Black people had a history of facing violence when rumored to be romantically/sexually engaged with white people. Other episodes acknowledged the social and political gain/loss that comes with being in an interracial relationship. But the limitation of the media depictions lies in that they often struggle to have meaningful conversations about the implications of the relationship. The depiction is largely reserved for discussion about outside perceptions and influences on the relationship. However, this depiction

itself also provides meaningful social commentary because it acknowledges the poor depiction of interracial relationships. It generally suggests that even on television people struggle to accurately depict and consider these unique relationships. This contributes to the discourse around interracial relationships as a measure of social progress because it acknowledges the limitations in the media engaging in fulfilling conversations about interracial relationships.

Indeed, in the interview component, few variables were isolated that had a greater impact on predicting and explaining familial responses than race. In the six interviews that I conducted, I isolated gender, race, socioeconomic status, and diversity of upbringing. A meaningful trend that appeared was the association between upbringing and dating history. Three of the Black participants reported growing up in predominantly white areas and subsequently being primarily attracted to white people. The frequency at which this seems to suggest upbringing and environment play a crucial role in the formation of interracial relationships. Another trend that was identified was that wealthier families are more accepting of interracial relationships than poorer families. This was in part attributed to exchange theory which says that romantic relationships are an exchange of resources. In the research, wealthier families often lack culturally salient values and traditions that are found in poorer families. It was also attributed to the fact that wealthier people tend to have higher education levels and are subsequently more socially accepting.

Finally, in the survey component, the reasoning and logic behind attitudes and perceptions of interracial relationships were uncovered, and there were no variables that could predict the sentiments. This led to an understanding that feelings about interracial relationships are largely personal, and not dependent on factors like race, gender, etc. This chapter also shed light on where the sentiments came from. True love and cultural appreciation are the primary

reasons respondents selected why they support interracial relationships. Inversely, Fear of conflict within relationships and differences in social perspective was the most selected reason for not engaging in interracial relationships. These factors expose the fact that sentiments surrounding interracial relationships are fluid and vary immensely from person to person. Lastly, responses to open-ended questions led to the finding that individuals have personal experiences that shape their attitudes towards interracial relationships. In summary, the general lack of variable correlations, suggests that sentiments around interracial relationships are personal, and are not determined by any one factor.

When Dubois makes comments about the lack of social progress since slavery in The Souls of Black Folks, he recognizes the racism that is inbred in the United States. He also acknowledges that that is not expected to change anytime soon. Interracial relationships as a means of social progress become salient here because the role of race shows how race is pervasive. Intimate, romantic relationships, where people are meant to be vulnerable and express deep emotions. These are ideal spaces of peace and compassion, and yet race shows up. Race is not only present but blatant in that it forces the relationship participants to acknowledge and engage in conversations about race. The research in this project reaffirms this, but still, some questions remain. What will it take for interracial relationships to be devoid of race as a concept? Is this a possibility? What does it mean that interracial relationships are a measure of social progress? And how will interracial relationships depict genuine social progress, what does that look like? My original research subsequently opened the door to more discussions and deeper understandings of interracial relationships and general understandings of race.

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### Appendix

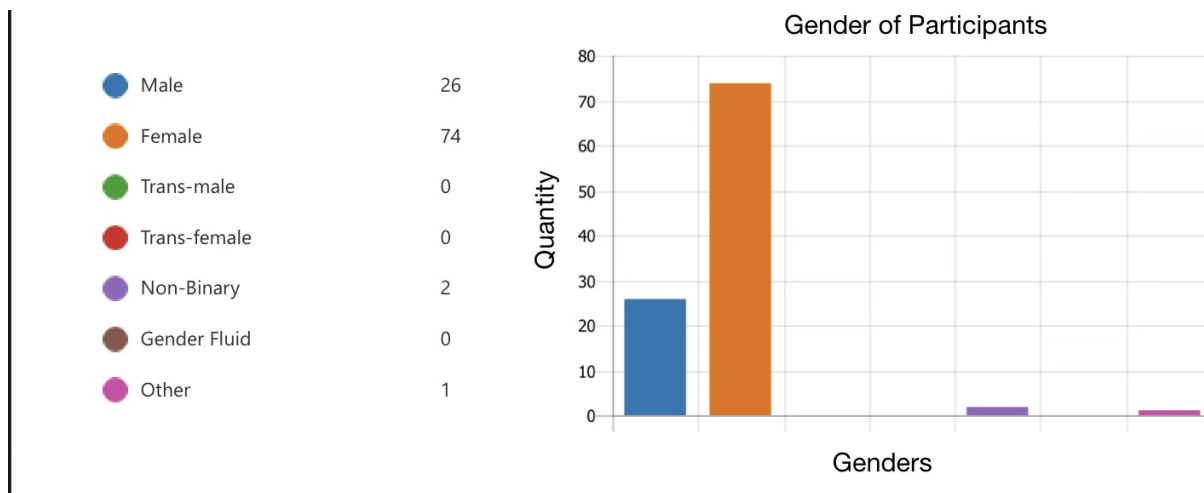


Figure 4

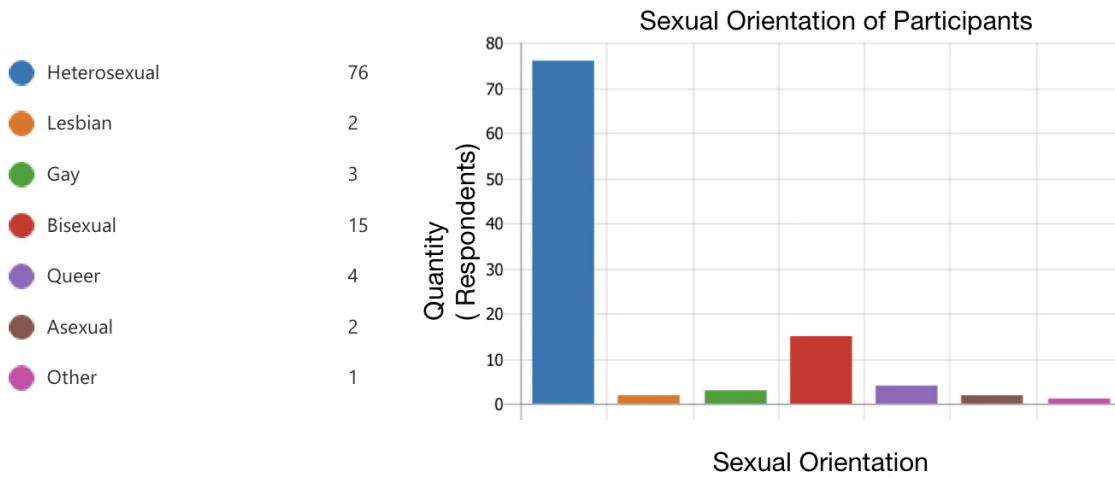


Figure 5

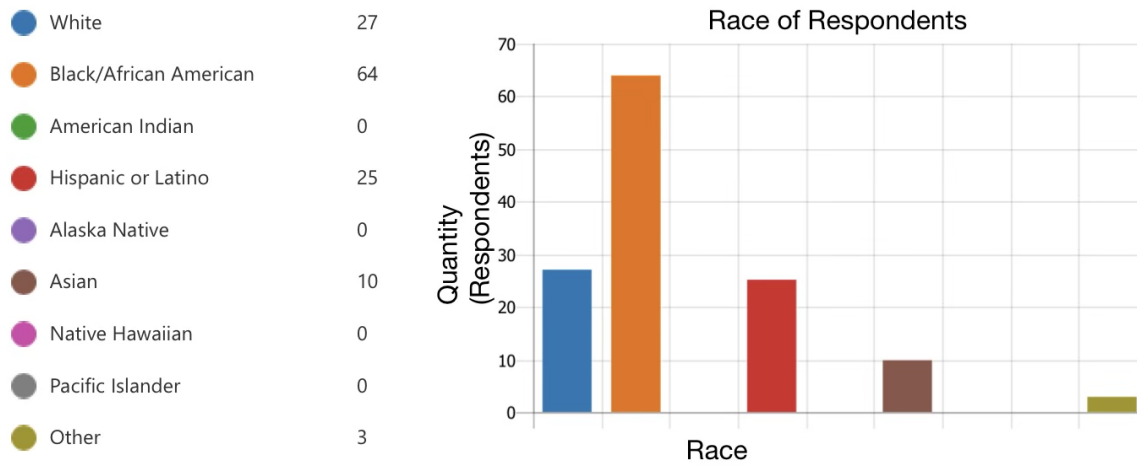


Figure 6

Are you currently in a monogamous romantic relationship?

Yes	42
No	52
Its complicated	9
Other	0



Figure 7

White	11
Black/African American	23
American Indian	0
Hispanic or Latino	12
Alaska Native	0
Asian	4
Native Hawaiian	0
Pacific Islander	0
Other	6

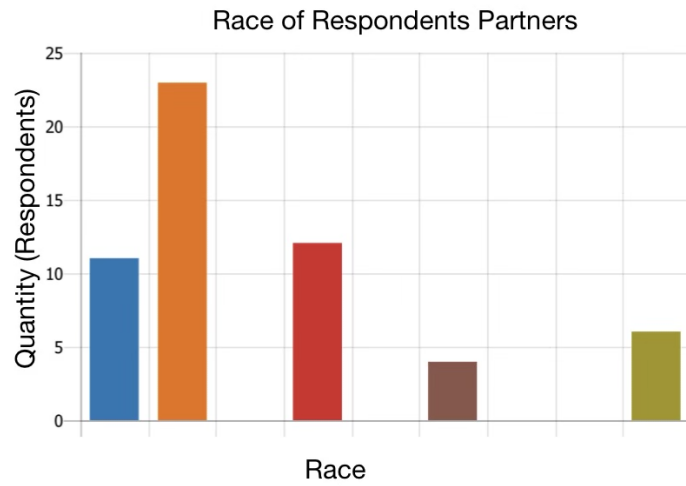


Figure 8