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UTOPIC SUBJECTS, POST-RACIAL DESIRES: MIXED-RACE, INTIMACY, AND THE ON-LINE DATING EXPERIENCE

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by

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Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2017

Dedication

For the women who have been called exotic or had strangers put hands in their hair. For the women who have wondered if there was something "wrong" with them. For the women who found someone who makes them happy and the women who suffered through a parade of unsolicited dick pics, uncreative *OkCupid* messages, and awful first dates. For the women who demanded more from their partners and their families, who knew their worth, who refused to be anyone's mocha-princess-fantasy-playthings.

Utopic Subjects, Post-Racial Desires: Mixed-Race, Intimacy, and the On-line Dating Experience

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2017

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Dating, cohabitating, and marriage processes aided by online dating are central topics of interest for researchers interested in modern modes of relationship formation. This qualitative multi-method dissertation intervenes by assessing self-identified mixed-race women's understandings of race, gender, and class while in the *process* of dating, providing insight into the experiences that are hidden within analyses of large-scale online dating trends. Through digital ethnography, content analysis of 225 profiles from the online dating website, *OkCupid*, and 30 in-depth interviews with mixed-race women residing in Texas, this dissertation goes beyond notions of dating and marriage that emphasize a market-based exchange. Instead, it presents the practices used to entice and select potential partners, centering the factors that frame the production and regulation of race within relationships. For mixed-race women who are dating both on- and off-line, appearance and ethnic identity factor in how they are racialized, how they racialize others, and therefore, how racial dynamics play out. Mixed-race women use *vetting strategies*, the specific ways of listening to, and prompting, potential partners on dates to determine their politics. In particular, women who are mixed with black inquire about

current events, referencing mainstream issues related to blackness (e.g. police brutality). Women who have Arab or Middle Eastern backgrounds also try to screen for Islamophobia in these ways. I also present three narrative frames that mixed-race women use to frame racial boundaries in their committed relationships. These women rely on skin color and cultural differences to name what is and is not an interracial relationship; mixed-race women also actively avoid dating certain men who share racial and ethnic characteristics with male members of their families. Ultimately, mixed-race women are concerned with who they choose to date because they view their choices as reflections of how they racially identify themselves. By focusing on how mixed-race women describe and interpret their on- and off-line experiences, this dissertation shows how the logics of colorblindness and anti-blackness extend into everyday life, demonstrating contemporary meanings of race and the post-racial in the United States.

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INTRODUCTION

FINDING LOVE IN A HOPELESS PLACE

Looking at my phone to check the time, I anxiously searched my phone to make sure I had not missed a text from Audre[1], the woman I would be meeting for an interview on that rainy and overcast afternoon. Sipping my chai latte, I scanned the main room of the Halcyon Coffee Bar, a trendy cigar and cocktail bar–coffee shop fusion spot located in downtown Austin. Light-skinned and extremely fit, I recognized Audre immediately when she walked in, despite her being dressed in mismatched exercise clothes and the fact that she was hiding her face beneath a tattered baseball cap, her tightly coiled curls poking out in a small ponytail puff. When she sat down across from me, gracefully draping her toned arms on the table, we started a stereotypical small talk exchange: "How are you?" "Isn't this weather awful?"

Approximately 10 minutes into our conversation, a tall, dark-skinned man dressed casually in dark-wash jeans and a tee shirt, his afro shaved into a mohawk, walked up to our table. In a deep voice he asked, "I think I'm supposed to be meeting you two?" As Audre blushed a deep shade of red, I was surprised to learn that she had invited a first date to our interview. Her surprise and genuine happiness that Jason decided to join us was evident on her face (in addition to the fact that she kept exclaiming, "I can't believe you showed up!"). In getting to witness Audre and Jason's first meeting after finding

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[1] All names used in this dissertation are pseudonyms (see more on this in Chapter 2 (pp. 71-81)

[2] Though the U.S. Census has measured some forms of multiracial identity in the past (such as with the inclusion of "mulatto" in 1850-1890 and 1910-1920, and the categories "quadroon" and "octoroon" in

each other the week prior on *OkCupid* – an online dating website that caters to a variety of people looking to meet other people for friendship, casual sex, or short-term and long-term relationships – I simultaneously felt that I was both intruding on a private moment *and* that I was being allowed to be a part of someone else's love story. Audre and Jason even joked that that they would name their first child after me, maintaining the levity in what was initially an awkward situation for everyone.

Despite these auspicious beginnings, it only took a week for the glow around Audre and Jason to fizzle out. When she and I spoke during her follow up interview, she noted her disappointment that things had moved too quickly between them and that Jason appeared to not be as interested in a serious relationship as she had hoped. I share the story of Audre and Jason here to illustrate what continues to be a concern among those who take the leap and join an online dating site: dating is hard and there are no guarantees that you will get your happily ever after.

With the ever-increasing number of online dating websites and phone applications launching regularly, news outlets like *The Guardian* have suggested that the "popularity boom" of online dating can be traced to a decrease in the stigma associated with it, as well as a entire generation of people who have "grown up online" driving increased usage (Cox 2014). In fact, the 2016 *Singles in America* study conducted by online dating stalwart, *Match*, found that 53 percent of single people have a dating profile, with millenials being 57 percent more likely to have an online dating profile than any other generation (Fisher and Garcia 2017). According to a 2016 report from *Consumer Reports*, over 40 percent of people who used online dating say it led to a serious long-term

relationship or marriage, and most people surveyed for the report stated that they prefer free sites like *OkCupid* and *Tinder* over paid sites like *Match* and *eHarmony* (Dickler 2017). It remains evident that online dating will not be going away anytime soon and various parties – including researchers and business investors – continue to seek answers about what people get out of dating via technological intervention and how the experience can be improved.

This dissertation is an exploration of the on- and off-line dating experiences of women who self-identify as "mixed-race," particularly the ways that they come to understand and construct race and racial identities in their pursuit of, and within existing, intimate relationships. Interchangeably referred to by mixed-race scholars as "mixed-race," "biracial," "multiracial" or "multiethnic," the multiracial population in the United States is one of the fastest growing groups; between 2000 and 2010, the number of people identifying as two or more races grew by 2.2 million people, an increase of nearly a third (Jones and Bullock 2012).[2] Despite this growth, the category of mixed-race remains contested due to much of the push for Census recognition of multiple racial identities coming from white parents who felt slighted by the racial identities available to their children (DaCosta 2007) and variability in measurement of those identifying as such. Yet, numerous scholars have dedicated research to this population and increasingly, several sociologists have begun to explore the relationship between mixedness (self-identified

[2] Though the U.S. Census has measured some forms of multiracial identity in the past (such as with the inclusion of "mulatto" in 1850-1890 and 1910-1920, and the categories "quadroon" and "octoroon" in 1890) these categories were intended to measure any Americans with "any perceptible trace of African blood" (see more in Pew Research Center 2015). In 2000, the U.S. Census first began measuring multiracial identity in its contemporary understanding, where individuals can mark "all that apply."

and perceived) and racial inequality in online dating (see Curington et al. 2015; Feliciano and Kizer 2016; McGrath et al. 2016; Rafalow et al. 2017; Robnett and Feliciano 2011).

Growing popularity as a research topic aside, it is because of the cultural, political, and legal contestation around acknowledging mixedness that I believe this research is important. In my efforts to illuminate how race, gender, sexuality, and class intersect in the experiences of mixed-race women, this dissertation contributes to broader understandings of how these constructions operate within important societal interactions, such as relationships formation. These intersections of identity are particularly important in terms of issues of sexual racism, wherein the sexual and romantic appeal of an individual is informed by racialized understandings of sexuality (Bedi 2016; Nagel 2003; Robinson 2015). By focusing on how intimacy impacts the frames through which mixed-race people think about race, this dissertation unpacks the means by which mixed-race women in particular navigate racial, cultural, gendered, and sexual stereotypes, as well as mitigate societal and familial expectations that are constrained by economic backgrounds, educational achievement, and classed understandings of femininity and masculinity. Further, this dissertation provides a unique approach to studying online dating, constituting one of the few (if not the only) qualitative method-driven studies of mixed-race people's experiences with online dating, utilizing digital ethnography, in-depth interviewing, and content analysis. This approach provides an opportunity to peel back the digital screen and gain insight into what some online daters believe they are seeing and experiencing when using the platforms that have been deemed the future of dating.

In *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), Patricia Hill Collins illustrates how focusing on the sexual politics and love relationships of black women allows society to have a better understanding about the lives of *all* women; my focus on mixed-race women in this dissertation reveals certain gendered aspects of dating and intimacy, as well as constructions of desire. The women I interviewed noted a variety of ways in which race was a significant aspect of their dating experiences; for instance, when I asked Allyson about how she felt about discussing race and dating with me, she was quick to note that it was common activity for her:

> I feel like it's something that I have conversations about a lot. Like it's the kind of thing I talk about with my friends a lot. …Um, I feel like I don't have enough conversations? I talk about this a lot but frequently, the conversations I have about race and dating are with white friends.

Allyson's response was typical of my respondents in that dating – and the struggles inherent within it – is a significant conversation topic among friends and to an extent, family members. Many women expressed concern over whether the people in their lives fully understood their experiences. They viewed the interview with me as an opportunity to hopefully get some answers to things that had been on their minds. Throughout my interviews, these self-identified multiracial and multiethnic women describe a disappointment in the dating process and a struggle with online dating as possibly signifying their inability to date properly; the phrase, "am I doing something wrong?" became a repeated occurrence. This tendency to self-blame when relationships that begin online do not work out seems to stem from broader societal norms around women being the gatekeepers of romantic and sexual relationships. Among the women that I

interviewed, those who were marginalized due to being darker-skinned or larger-bodied were the people most concerned with what they might be doing "wrong" and how a lack of success online was indicative of lacking certain qualities. This inner-dialogue provides evidence for the ways in which relationship struggles become racialized.

The women I interviewed also shared their experiences with being fetishized, being compared to, or assumed to be "only", white women, and being deemed "exotic" by other people. These are themes that align with narratives from other studies of multiracial people, particularly in terms of how women are viewed (Brunsma 2006; DaCosta 2007; Renn 2004; Rockquemore 2002; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2008). Despite the negative view that studies of online dating have perpetuated due to the consistent findings of sexual racism and discrimination against the most marginalized – namely black women and Asian men (see Lin and Lundquist 2013; Rafalow et al. 2017) – the women I interviewed have shown me that some positives can be found. As India shares, online dating can have positive effects on one's self-perception:

> …in college I was always kind of like, "Oh gosh, I don't know, how these men feel about me? Like as a black woman, as an Asian woman, having these two different races and identities and just feeling like...generally undesirable by anyone. [laughs] And that was just a lot of issues. But when I - I think this was like 2012 and *Tinder* first launched - and realizing my swiping and matching with all these men was like a huge confidence booster and kind of like an affirmation like "Oh, these men are interested in me. They do find me attractive."

India is not alone in finding the simple act of matching on the quick-matching dating app *Tinder* to be a boost to her ego; a recent study found that 44 percent of millennial college students use the platform for "confidence boosting procrastination" (Calfas 2017). The fact that she recognizes a specific impact of her blackness and her Asian-ness on her

dating prospects speaks to the motivations behind this dissertation. It is with the sentiments of women like Allyson and India in mind that this dissertation explores the following research questions: What are the racialized, gendered, and sexualized context(s) that mixed-race women contend with when pursuing and maintaining relationships? What are the options available to mixed-race women in terms of how to present themselves on- and off-line? And, what are the ways in which mixed-race women are experiencing on-line dating websites in particular?

While sociological studies of sex and relationships have long accounted for the ways that race, gender, and class impact how people enter into and maintain relationships, much of the focus on these topics has been on people in interracial relationships and people navigating so-called "marriage markets." More recently, studies in this area have explored these issues in the context of online dating websites and other social media venues, tending to privilege analyses of online interactions rather than offline experiences. Additionally, due to the increased recognition of multiracial identities in the United States in the last 20 years, scholars see a need to understand how these racial identities have (and will) shift over time and how these identities influence how people access resources and navigate interactions with others. With this dissertation, I bring together these areas of research and contribute an analysis of the contemporary romantic experiences of an understudied population: self-identified mixed-race women. In investigating the romantic and sexual lives of multiracial and multiethnic women, I expand knowledge of the processes people engage in to find partners and how race, gender, sexuality, and class may inhibit one's ability to establish relationships. By

investigating the notion of "success" that several studies of online dating engage with (see Curington et al. 2015, Lin and Lundquist 2013, Rudder 2014, etc.) I provide evidence for how a market-based understanding of relationships elides the messiness of everyday life and introduce some additional nuance into academic discussions of race, romantic relationships and intimacy as facilitated by technology. Below, I provide an outline for the chapters that comprise this dissertation.

Outline of the Dissertation

In the following chapter, Chapter 1, "Literature Review: Race in Heterosexual Sex, Dating, and Marriage," I situate this dissertation within a broader conversation about the role of race and racism in the heteronormative dating and mating practices that characterize mainstream U.S. culture. Beginning with an assessment of the sociological importance of studying multiracial populations, I move on to an assessment of dating and marriage markets and the construction of intimacy. I follow with a discussion of gender, sexuality, and mixed-raced fetishism within dating markets and online dating.

Chapter 2, "Studying Love On-line: A Digital Methodology", provides a description of the methodological approaches that define this study, namely my engagement with emergent techniques like digital ethnography, a method that translates principles of "physical" ethnography to studies of spaces like social networking websites (Murthy 2008). In addition to a year of participant-observation on the online dating website, *OkCupid*, I conducted a content analysis of 225 dating profiles from *OkCupid* users located in Austin, Texas, Houston, Texas, and San Antonio, Texas, and interviewed

30 self-identified multiracial and multiethnic women who used *OkCupid* to facilitate their dating lives. As part of these interviews, I established a method for observing and questioning online daters use of dating platforms, which I term *platform elicitation*, modeled off of photo elicitation methodologies wherein researchers prompt respondents with questions. The subsequent three chapters comprise my empirical chapters, following the arc of the online dating experience: first, I explore the process of creating a dating profile, followed by an analysis of the ways that women decide whether someone they have met in person is worth dating or not. I finish the empirical section with an assessment of the narrative frames that mixed-race women use to determine which relationships "count" as interracial or not, providing insight into how they draw racial boundaries in the context of these intimate relationships.

With Chapter 3, "Digitizing Mixed-Race: Navigating *OkCupid* and Crafting a Dating Identity", I trace the motivating factors that encourage multiracial and multiethnic women to sign up for online dating accounts, focusing on the ways in which they navigate the online space and how they represent themselves through their profiles. I discuss *the appeal formula*, a term I developed to describe the calculated approach to selecting pictures for the *OkCupid* profile based on a combination of selfies – self-portraits taken with a cell phone – full body photos, and photos of hobbies or interests, among others. Ultimately, I conclude that mixed-race women rely primarily on photos and the site's available racial categories to identify their mixedness to potential romantic partners.

Investigating the tactics that comprise what I term *vetting strategies*, Chapter 4, "Dating in the Time of #BlackLivesMatter and #NoBanNoWall, or Vetting Strategies in a Post-Racial Era", explores the discourses and logics that self-identified multiracial and multiethnic women online daters mobilize as a tool to determine whether certain men are worth dating. Utilizing stances on incidents associated with the social movement Black Lives Matter (BLM) or U.S. Islamophobia more generally as a metric of racial progressiveness, this chapter demonstrates how the language around, and produced by, social movements (in terms of mainstream media coverage) influences the ways in which some women discuss race, gender, and racism. Further, this chapter illustrates how far the logics of colorblindness and anti-blackness extend into everyday life.

In Chapter 5, "Color, Culture, or Cousin?: Framing Boundaries in Interracial Relationships", I explore the social construction of racial boundaries by looking at contemporary understandings of interracial heterosexual relationships from the perspective of mixed-race women. I explain the characteristics that comprise the three narrative frames that mixed-race women use to name and describe what counts as an interracial pairing. These three frames are noted in the title of this chapter: "color" – referencing skin tone, "culture" – referencing cultural practices or knowledge, and "cousin" – referencing familiarity between potential dating partners and male members of the family. Ultimately, this chapter argues that appearance and racial identity play the most significant roles in how mixed-race women navigate race within their own relationships, relying on these three frames as a means of covering up their own discriminatory dating practices.

The final chapter, “Conclusion: (Mixed-)Race, Intimacy, and the Enduring Power of the Color Line”, provides an assessment of the connections between the empirical chapters. I situate the findings from my interviews and content analysis amid a broader conversation about the color line and follow with a discussion of the limitations of this study. In offering directions future research, I reaffirm the contributions of this study as a means of expanding knowledge of the mechanics of online dating and the role of race in shaping family formation processes.

CHAPTER 1

LITERATURE REVIEW: RACE IN HETEROSEXUAL SEX, DATING, AND MARRIAGE

Introduction

In this chapter, I first outline hybridity, post-racialism, and the expanding multiracial populations in the United States, laying out the debates on these demographic shifts and increasing multiracialism. Then, I locate my dissertation within the existing literature on heterosexual dating and marriage markets and intimacy, focusing on constructions of racial boundaries and shifts in dating and marriage trends over time, as well as the role of online dating in relationship formation processes. I follow with an assessment of gender, sexuality and racial fetishism, discussing sexual racism and. I finish this chapter by identifying the research questions this project strives to answer and conclude with a brief outline of the chapters that follow.

Hybridity, Post-racialism, and the Growing Mixed-Race Population

There has long been a public interest, particularly in the world of politics, in the mixing of races in the United States. The notion of mixed-race Americans has been around since the nation's founding, with politicians like Thomas Jefferson and other prominent white men like Hector St. John de Crévecœur, author of *Letters from an American Farmer* (1792), concerning themselves with how the blending of different peoples – namely Europeans – would establish a "new" American race (discussed in

Carter 2013). As literary historian Jolie A. Sheffer (2013) describes, popular romance fictions of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries participated in a broader conversation about a multiracial national identity and the familial ties that bind people together. The mixing of racial groups and cultural practices, particularly the emergence of new cultural forms – what some postcolonial scholars term hybridity (see Bhaba 1994) – has been a central component of what it means to be American, most evident in the materialization of ideologies like multiracialism, wherein racial harmony is achieved through interracial relationships and multiracial children (Ibrahim 2012; Sexton 2008).

Asian-American comedian Kristina Wong (2014) has quipped that this "magic mixed-race future" will be defined by members of our society having "fucked the hate out of everyone and in the process, thousands of years of colonialism, violence, and systemic oppression" which will "disappear into the 'interesting facial features' of mixed-race people." Within this logic, if we all individually choose to "look past" race and merge into a "unified, beige human race" (Squires 2014, p. 4), we do not have to think about what social and political practices would need to happen in order to achieve the post-racial. Communications scholar Catherine Squires (2014) states that the notion of "post-racial" has been referenced as early as 1976 in mainstream media, suggesting that in this context, "post-racial politics" referred to a politics that would result from the dismantling of institutional white supremacy (p. 17). After this one-time usage to describe the policies of then-presidential candidate Jimmy Carter, post-racial did not reemerge as a widely adopted term to describe demographic shifts until the 2000s. Squires notes that this term seemingly satisfies a need that "diversity," "multicultural"

and "colorblind" do not in terms of the media's ability to discuss issues such as affirmative action, civil rights, the "style and appeal" of black politicians and mixed-race celebrities of African descent, or the fascination with shifting racial and ethnic demographics (p. 18).

The contemporary version of discourses around the "mixing of race" began to take shape in the 1990s, when mass media was inundated with images of a multicultural world. Squires (2014) found that in the 1990s, post-racial described a distant future where racial discrimination no longer existed whereas in the 2000s, particularly post-2008, post-racial was framed as something more present. The infamous *TIME Magazine* cover from November 18th, 1993, starring "Eve," a computer generated woman produced from millions of faces of varying races and ethnicities, was meant to represent what *TIME* called the "new face of America" – specifically the result of "immigrants shaping the world's first multicultural society." Eve and her racially ambiguous appearance embody how Americans are meant to think about race[3]; she suggests that the distinctions between racial groups will fall away as immigration, interracial marriage, and the birth of mixed-race children continues to rise.[4] In 2013, twenty years after "Eve" became an iconic image in American popular culture, *National Geographic* ran a photo essay on its online platform, titled "The Changing Face of America." The photo essay is comprised of portraits of men, women, and children from across the United States who identify in

[3] "Eve" was also not an accurate representation of the projected ethnic and racial diversity in U.S. citizenship, as she was reportedly "lightened" to provide a more palatable image.

[4] *TIME Magazine* continued to run other, similar cover stories, such as April 23rd, 2001's "All Mixed Up," which touts the "100% Cool" nature of Eurasians and how they are the "new face of Asia" alongside the image of three mixed-race Asian actresses.

some way as multiracial, creating a mosaic of tan, racially vague faces peppered with blue or green eyes. The sub-title of the essay claims that, "race is no longer so black and white," a nod to not only the failures of a binary racial system, but also the ways that mixed-race people can fall in between or across various racial categories. The image of one woman from this photo series (see Figure 1.1), with her long blonde curly hair, large green eyes, full lips, and tanned skin has gained particular traction amongst digital media outlets and social media spaces, with her face placed next to headlines proclaiming "*National Geographic* predicted what America will look like in 2050, and it's beautiful." The year 2050 has become very significant, as this year is when the United States Census Bureau projects that non-Hispanic whites will become a "minority," meaning that everyone else added together – blacks, Hispanics, Asians and Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans – will outnumber the "white" population. The political manifestation of the fears around these demographic shifts are being felt all over the West, as seen with the 2016 "Brexit" vote wherein the United Kingdom exited the European Union, as well as the 2016 election of Donald Trump as president of the United States.

It was not enough to simply note that a rise in the immigrant population might shift the racial demographics of the United States; *TIME* and other media outlets seem to need to provide U.S. society with an idealized image of that racial shift, one that is only vaguely "ethnic" due to her slightly tanned skin and dark hair. With these images, Americans, white Americans in particular, can rest assured that America will not turn too "dark," though the fear of a lost America still exists in the forefront of many American minds (DaCosta 2007). Of note is the fact that over the last two decades, the population

of people in the United States identifying as multiracial has grown at a rate three times as fast as the growth of the overall U.S. population. A 2015 Pew Research Center study estimates that 6.9 percent of adults are multiracial and that for many who identify as multiracial – nearly 30 percent according to Pew – this identity shifts over time, especially in the context of relationships with family, friends, and significant others.

Figure 1.1: *National Geographic* essay, "The Changing Face of America"

Additionally, gender plays a significant role in terms of who identifies as multiracial. Women are substantially more likely to identify as mixed-race, which sociologist Lauren Davenport (2016) argues may be due to women being viewed as "exotic" whereas men are culturally perceived as "men of color." Other research (Buggs 2011; Kwan-Lafond and Paragg 2014) has found that even mixed-race men associate the

notion of "exotic" only with women and not themselves. The notion that mixed-race people, particularly women, are "agents of change" or are leading us toward some ideal future (Beltrán 2005; Ifekwunigwe 1999; Jolivette 2012; Nishime 2005) serves to imbue those who are marked as "mixed-race" or "racially-ambiguous" with a sort of mystery (Dagbovie 2007). The social reproduction of multiracial populations as both attractive and as a reason for caution invokes the "pleasure—danger" paradigm (Vance 1984), in that those who are perceived as "racially different" are fascinating due to their alleged existence "outside" or "beyond" established racial categorization while also inspiring fear due to what their existence can mean for how race is understood. Historically, fears about racial-mixing were upheld by the legal barring of miscegenation – marriage, cohabitation, and/or sexual relations between people of different racial backgrounds – mostly due to concerns about mixed-race children and the erosion of, or contamination of, whiteness. Also, this "pleasure—danger" binary is widespread in film depictions of interracial relationships, such as in *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960) and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967) and in various sociological studies where extended family members worry over "what will happen to the children" (see Bonilla-Silva 2013, Childs 2005, etc.)

As sociologist Jennifer Sims (2012) notes, the "Biracial Beauty Stereotype" marks mixed-race women's bodies as inherently attractive and desirable. This "attractiveness" has fostered a cultural fetishization of mixed-race people, with those whose bodies can blur racial boundaries being particularly sought after for film and television or to advance certain beauty standards in industries like fashion (Dagbovie 2007; Beltrán and Fojas 2008; Russell-Cole et al. 2013). The visibility of mixed-race

bodies in popular culture and the public imagination revolves around a particular "look" – one a light skinned woman with long curly or wavy hair and racially ambiguous features – though more recently, this "look" has expanded to include the features of anyone deemed to appear "exotic", meaning not white. This then leads to assumptions being made about those who appear to blur racial lines or who are viewed as racially ambiguous even if they categorize themselves as monoracial, e.g., tan southern Europeans (especially Italians) or light-skinned American black women (who may have historical traces of racial mixing but are considered racially "black" or "African-American"). With a mixed-race and/or exotic look socially constructed as attractive, the projection of mixedness onto "non-mixed" bodies can be framed as complimentary. This further romanticizes a future where people are "all mixed" and allegedly all beautiful.

As anthropologist Jayne Ifekwunigwe (1999) contends, the *métisse* [mixed-race] experience of multiple identities illuminates our understandings of the "discursive and political problematics of Blackness and Whiteness" (p. 170). With Chicana feminist theorist Gloria Anzaldúa's (2007) concept of the "new mestiza", she articulates the ways that tension around identity, particularly binary concepts like "the border", can provide scholars with a means of thinking beyond Western logics of race, gender, and sexuality. The "multiple identities" Ifekwunigwe refers to are racial ones, specifically the gendered identities of black and white. She suggests that mixed-race people can act as "agents of change" to revise what she terms the "double caste system" or a bi-racialized society (p. 170). Ifekwunigwe further argues that the attempts that mixed-race women make to position themselves in racially polarized societies denies them full womanhood, with the

desire(s) for "racial" reconciliation and an integrated sense of self leading to painful psychosocial consequences for women whose "lived realities defy the one drop rule" (p. 171). Thus, Ifekwunigwe advocates for a more complex understanding of race and gender. Though there are arguments to be made about how U.S. society continues to cling to the black-white and white-nonwhite binaries that have historically characterized the study of "race relations" (Bonilla-Silva 2013), studies that include mixed-race people require a more expansive approach to understanding racial categorization, as both Anzaldúa and Ifekwunigwe indicate.

Shifting Dating and Marriage Market(s) and Varying Notions of Intimacy

Intimacy is a concept that many scholars associate with sex. In her book, *Intimate Strangers: Men and Women Together* (1984), feminist scholar Lillian Rubin suggests that relationships between men and women are some of the most problematic relationships in contemporary American society. Rubin argues that sex becomes the place where some men can "contact their deeper feeling states" (p. 110) while others strip sexuality of all intense feeling. In contrast, she suggests that women are closer to their feelings and thus are less capable of having sex without "emotional contact"; in fact, she posits that women fear "losing themselves" in a given relationship. Similarly, according to sociologist Anthony Giddens (1993), sex is about gender and intimacy. Giddens suggests that nonreproductive "plastic sexuality" has become part of the modern life-style, allowing the modern self to perpetually recreate itself through a "reflexive narrative" (p. 75). For Giddens, the self is constituted and recreated through the "pure relationship," which is a

social relation "entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; and which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfaction for each individual to stay" (p. 58). Giddens believes the intimacy facilitated by this pure relationship is democratic and the root of this democracy is sexuality (p. 188).

In these constructions of intimacy, sex is framed as the means by which people establish closeness and develop emotional investment. This understanding fails to provide space for intimate relationships like friendships or even family. Alternatively, sociologist Lynn Jamieson (1988) states that intimacy is a "very specific sort of knowing, loving and 'being close to' another person", a *disclosing intimacy* that relies upon mutual disclosure and an intimacy of the self rather than an intimacy of the body (p. 1). As Jamieson notes, this form of intimacy can only allow people to participate as "equals" if social barriers and structural inequities across genders, generations, classes and races can be transcended. Unlike Giddens, who conveniently ignores the ways in which race complicates gender and sexuality, Jamieson recognizes that race – among other social categories – must be transcended in order to achieve true intimacy. While it is problematic to suggest that sexual intimacy leads to "real" intimacy or even to the breaking down of social inequalities, it is clear that gender, sex(uality), and race are tied closely together in terms of how intimate relationships are developed and maintained.

Sociologist George Yancey's (2002) position that understanding who is willing to engage in "interracial" relationships is useful for evaluating the degree to which social distance has decreased and how far our society has progressed has served as a motivating

factor for many studies of interracial dating, cohabitation, and marriage (Blau et al. 1984; Qian and Lichter 2001, 2007, 2011). The attempts to map marriage markets – the pool(s) of potential partners available for dating, cohabitation, or marriage – are a means of trying to discern how people are developing intimate relationships (based on the assumption that marriage is the most "intimate" of all relationships). However, it can not be assumed that because a relationship is "intimate" – in that people have committed to being in a relationship with each other – that there are no social inequalities to contend with. As literature has shown, race does not disappear in relationships that traverse racial lines (Frankenberg 1993; Nemoto 2009; Steinbugler 2012; Twine 2010). In their study of same-sex daters, sociologist Matthew Rafalow and colleagues (2017) state that racialized gender hierarchies are especially salient for white gay and lesbian daters, with lesbians of color being the most open in their dating preferences. These findings provide additional evidence of the ways power dynamics determine how intimate certain relationships can be. As feminist scholar Anne McClintock (1995) illustrates, working-class white women in Victorian England shared a degree of intimacy with their employers due to having psychological dominance over the children they cared for in addition to being subjected to upper-class mistresses (pp. 85-86). These dynamics established certain sexual scripts – with mothers embodying the "Madonna" and nurses the "whore" (87) – while also converting working-class women into "spectacle" (pp. 83-84). This spectacle was rooted in racialized notions of gender and sexuality, with working-class white women's equation with black masculinity serving to shore up their fetishization (pp. 103-120). *Racial fetishization* – the racist stereotyping that defines the racial Other as fixed and knowable,

often simultaneously demonizing and idolizing certain aspects of racial difference – has a long history in intimate relationships, revolving around the objectification of the bodies of people of color. As McClintock (1995) discusses, working-class white women were in a position to be sexually fetishized because of their connection to "blackness" through manual labor. Arthur Munby's illustrations of women in their "dirt"[5] not only demonstrated class status but also racially marked women's bodies (McClintock 1995, pp. 75-132).

Cultural sociologist Joane Nagel (2003) argues that differences of color, culture, country, ancestry, language, and religion are the materials that build ethnic, racial, and national identities and boundaries. She asserts that these ethnic boundaries are also sexual boundaries. In the United States, Nagel claims that the sexual underlies everything and magnifies the racial; therefore, it is important to recognize where race and sex intersect as "intimates", giving power to one another. Feminist scholar Angela Davis (1983) notes that racism has relied upon the assumption that white men possess "an incontestable right of access" to black women's bodies (p. 175). Further, accessibility to the bodies of women of color has a colonial legacy, rooted in perceptions that women of color are "creatures of the flesh" who "hide their pleasure" to fuel fantasies of "invincible masculinity" (Bhattacharyya 1998, pp. 130-133). The *ethnosexual frontiers* created through these colonial legacies are the erotic locations and exotic destinations that are "surveilled and supervised, patrolled and policed, regulated and restricted" and constantly

[5] "Dirt" in this context refers to the grime, sweat, and coal dust that covered a Victorian-era laborer's body. In Munby's illustrations, this "dirt" rendered women who worked in the mines (or as domestics) as extremely muscular – the point of looking more masculine than feminine – and physically black.

penetrated by individuals "forging sexual links with ethnic others across ethnic borders" (Nagel 2003, p. 14). Though Nagel describes various forms of sexual contact – ranging from those who establish long-term liaisons to those who undertake "expeditions" across ethnic divides for recreational, casual, or "exotic" sexual encounters (p. 14) – she suggests that sexual intimacy allows some people to assimilate. This lines up with the logic of the marriage market, in that assimilation occurs through intermarriage (which is essentially, assimilation through interracial sex and/or "intimacy"). However, what Nagel terms *ethnic conversion* only tends to be available to those who are not barred by racial boundaries or by strong ethnic associations; more research is still needed to determine how mixed-race people (women in particular) and their construction(s) of race may challenge the landscape of U.S. dating and marriage markets and notions of intimacy.

Demographers Zenchao Qian and Daniel Lichter (2011) identify the expanding mixed-race population as one aspect of "rapidly shifting marriage market conditions" (p. 1066), suggesting that there is a need for analyses of the romantic experiences of mixed-race people in the United States. Historically, the literature that explores romantic and sexual relationships tends to be extremely heteronormative in its understanding of dating and marriage markets. More recently, researchers who include non-heterosexual people tend to focus their efforts on gay men, with little attention paid to women seeking same-sex relationships. Further, sociological studies more broadly consistently rely upon the assumption that individuals seek to cohabitate or marry because they expect to be better off in these relationships than single (Guzzo 2006; Lundberg and Pollack 1993), though these logics have been challenged by queering understandings of family, especially for

queer women of color (see Acosta 2013; Moore 2011). In fact, sociological work on health emphasizes the role of both quantity and quality of social relationships (see Umberson and Moretz 2010); thus, there are relevant reasons for studying how people end up in committed relationships and what barriers there may be for certain populations participating in various dating and marriage markets. While the racial boundaries of the "market" are shaped by structural conditions (Blau et al. 1984) – such as racial attitudes, racial and ethnic segregation, and demographic shifts due to influxes of immigrant populations (Qian and Lichter 2007, 2011) – opportunities are further constrained by socioeconomic status and factors like level of education. The suggestion by Qian and Lichter (2011) that an expanding mixed-race population may undermine what social scientists understand about dating and marriage markets implies that there is something "different" about the way that the mixed-race population dates and/or marries. While there is limited evidence that mixed-race people engage in dating, cohabitating, or marrying any differently from other racialized bodies in the United States, it is critical to understand how the inclusion of mixed-race people in these analyses frames the racial boundaries of possible "markets" in particular ways.

The logic of color–blindness and the fallacy of equal opportunity have infiltrated various societal institutions by privileging the perspective(s) of particular bodies or what Nirmal Puwar (2004) terms the "somatic norm." In *Racism Without Racists*, Eduardo sociologist Bonilla-Silva argues that the U.S. is headed toward a Latin American form of racial stratification, where whites will be "buffered" from interaction with the "collective black" by "honorary whites" (p. 227). This hierarchy is characterized by colorism – the

system of (dis)advantage dependent upon skin color (Hunter 2005) – and what Bonilla-Silva describes as "whitening" as ideology and practice (pp. 229-21). For Bonilla-Silva, Latin Americanization of the United States will allow color-blind racism to flourish, as it enables whites to claim to believe in racial equality, integration, and interracial marriage and yet, continue to exist in extensively white networks and relationships (pp. 230-231). Bonilla-Silva's (2013) inclusion of honorary whites in his racial framework facilitates an understanding of why certain racial groups – like Latinos, Asian-Americans, or those deemed "mixed-race" – are more likely to marry whites (Qian 1997; Qian and Lichter 2001, 2011) while also acknowledging that their "honorary" status does not necessarily equate to equal power to determine the dynamics of their dating and/or marital relationships (Frankenberg 1993; Nemoto 2009; Steinbugler 2012). Honorary status suggests that those with white-reading privilege or who benefit from being non-black people of color assist in the maintenance of an anti-black (tri-)racial hierarchy. Though individuals can work toward not upholding anti-blackness, socialization remains powerful. For instance, some scholars have indicated that Asian and Latino/a people will prefer to have few to no black people in their hypothetical imaginings of "mixed" neighborhoods (see Charles 2006, pp. 131-162).

According to sociologists Kerry Ann Rockquemore and Patricia Arend (2002) those who fall into honorary whiteness are "culturally white" but can be barred from full inclusion within whiteness due to phenotype (p. 59). Thus, the racial position for multiracial people is inconsistent, seemingly one of honorary whiteness or as part of the "collective black," perpetuating a white–non-white binary of race. Though this binary is

problematic, it is relevant when discussing dating dynamics, as several scholars (Curington et al. 2015; Hunter 2005; Rondilla and Spickard 2007) note that colorism facilitates the ability of partially white multiracials to hold higher social status and to garner a so-called "preference premium" in online dating spaces (Curington et al. 2015). In line with these findings, Qian and Lichter (2011) suggest that some mixed-race people – particularly Asian-white and American Indian-white mixed individuals – have a greater ability to classify themselves as white. Additionally, Squires (2014) notes that multiracial and multiethnic people serve as a form of "safe diversity" bringing "color into the frame without conflict" (p. 7).

Qian and Lichter (2011) further propose that these tendencies of some multiracial people to classify as white could inflate the overall level of interracial marriage with whites and blur the racial boundaries between whites and Asians and American Indians. This blurring is viewed as problematic because of the noted "surge" in the number of interracial marriages. For the authors, the surge signals that "social distance has declined" and that "racial tolerance has grown" (p. 1068), implying that a blurring of the boundaries between whites and Asians and American Indians complicates what these increased marriage rates actually mean for racial tolerance. However, other scholars argue that individuals from this "buffer" class of honorary whites – mixed-race people specifically – experience being constrained by the "straightjacket of race" (Puwar 2004). As Qian and Lichter (2011) note, the growth of the mixed-race population has not led to a blurring of social boundaries between blacks and whites. This should not be surprising considering that there have always been people in between existing racial categories in the history of

the United States. Similarly to those from below them in Bonilla-Silva's racial hierarchy, mixed-race people are likely engaging in "racework" (Steinbugler 2012) in order to ensure the success of their relationships due to their partner(s) possessing a particular racial *habitus* – a set of primary networks and associations that reinforce the racial order by fostering racial solidarity (Bonilla-Silva 2013) – through which to understand racial difference.

Despite the observed movement in the category of "honorary" whiteness, much of the literature continues to make explicit distinctions. In subsuming ethnic whites into the broader category of "whiteness" (Waters 1990) heteropatriarchal objectives of the state are reaffirmed (Alexander 2006; Ferguson 2004). These objectives consist of the "masculinized gestures of normalization" that "exert and deploy force, generate new sexual meanings, displace and reinscribe old meanings, and discipline and punish women in disproportionate ways" (Alexander 2006, p. 23). Because processes of heterosexualization shape the state, women's sexual agency and erotic autonomy are (and always have been) deemed troublesome due to the way that they challenge the heteronormative nuclear family (Alexander 2006, pp. 22-23). The establishment of a buffer category full of "honorary whites" – more specifically, mixed-race people – strengthens these objectives, as heteropatriarchy facilitates the perpetuation of a "colonial inheritance" (Alexander 2006, p. 24). Therefore, when Qian and Lichter (2001, 2007, 2011) argue that social mobility is achieved through marital assimilation, they are perpetuating the notion of the nuclear, heterosexual family. It becomes especially problematic if some mixed-race people are possibly better able to assimilate or achieve

social mobility by marrying whites due to their own connection to whiteness, as this does little to undo the racial social distance that marriage market researchers believe is closing due to increases in intermarriage. Further, what does the supposed ability to "better" assimilate and achieve social mobility look like in an everyday sense?

By noting the ability of the most "mobile" and "assimilated" mixed-race individuals to pass as white, Qian and Lichter assume that a connection to whiteness means social mobility (and attractiveness in dating and marriage markets) becomes easier. Because marriage markets operate under the constraint of a racial hierarchy that privileges whiteness, mixed-race individuals can be pressured to uphold white heteropatriarchal norms and politics of respectability in order to maintain their "honorary white" position, effectively "Othering" and marginalizing those below in the racial hierarchy. This is evident in the ways that multiracial daters mixed with white are found to be less likely to seek partners that are non-white, especially to the detriment of Hispanic and black daters (Feliciano and Kizer 2016; McGrath et al. 2016). As sociologist Margaret Hunter (2005) argues, lighter-skinned people of color are granted privileges over darker-skinned people in areas such as income, education, housing, and the marriage market. In fact, the preference for lighter skin is not exclusively a "black or Latino problem," as it is practiced both by whites and people of color (Hunter 2005, p. 238). Therefore, it is important to expand knowledge of the experiences of "honorary whites" in the context of dating and marriage, as it informs researchers of not only multiracial people's understanding(s) of racial difference but also the ways in which sociological understandings of intimate relationships might be contested, particularly in

how sexual racism is or is not perpetuated in relationships involving mixed-race partners. Since lighter-skinned women are privileged over darker-skinned women in dating and marriage markets (Hunter 2005), it is evident that colorism manifests amongst many populations.

Gender, Sexuality, and Mixed-Race Fetishization

Who is or is not considered attractive and why, as well as what intersection(s) of race, sexuality, and gender informs what makes mixed-race people desirable is an important yet underexplored area for sociological inquiry. There are few studies in sociology that discuss the supposed "attractiveness" of mixed-race people or explicitly explore the dating lives of mixed-race people. For example, Michael Lewis (2010) used a collection of black, white, and mixed-race faces to determine perceived attractiveness, ultimately determining that the preference for mixed-race faces was indicative of hybrid vigor, the greater genetic fitness of mixed offspring. Interestingly, Lewis relies on a logic "cross-breeding" that historically has been used to deem multiracial people less than human (Daniel 1990) and yet, presents these findings as some kind of inherent attractiveness on the part of racially mixed people. More recent research from Lewis (2016) argues that how mixed-race faces are perceived is dependent upon the viewers experience with white faces or black faces; for people who are more accustomed to black faces, mixed-race faces are read as white (p. 510). Though Lewis engages a simplistic premise here, the perceived whiteness of a given person (and the ability to flout social conventions) will also be impacted by their gender and presumed sexual orientation

(Adjepong 2017). Relatedly, Jennifer Sims (2012) illustrates the continuing power of the "Biracial Beauty Stereotype" by analyzing the ratings of attractiveness by interviewers of participants. Contrary to most research that presents mixed-white multiracials as the most attractive, she finds that black and Asian participants were rated the most attractive. Despite these explorations of attractiveness, the dearth of research in these areas is surprising considering that the larger racial structure has a variety of implications for dating and marriage markets, as racialized notions of gender and sexuality inform much of attraction. As already noted, lighter skinned people of color experience preferential treatment in dating and marriage markets (Hunter 2005) and as Robert Reece (2016) has found, simply identifying as multiracial can lead to being perceived as more attractive. Further, Westerners who pursue sexual relationships with racial "Others" reify the superiority of whiteness and Western-ness through their sex tourism (Davidson and Taylor 1999). Here, categorization as an "Other" becomes an invitation for sexual curiosity and exploration, or what Joane Nagel (2003) frames as an encounter with an ethnosexual "frontier." This rendering of certain people as racial and sexual Others strengthens structures of power and control.

These racialized gender notions play a particularly large role in the likelihood of heterosexual exogamy for racial minorities in the United States, as black men are overwhelmingly more likely to outmarry with white people than black women, and Asian men are significantly less likely than Asian women to marry whites (Qian and Lichter 2001). All of this is supported by findings regarding the appeal of certain groups in on-line dating, where black women and Asian men are found to be rated the least attractive

(Feliciano, Robnett, and Komaie 2009; Rafalow et al. 2017; Robnett and Feliciano 2011; Rosenfeld and Kim 2005; Rudder 2014; Tsunokai et al. 2014) and the least likely to garner responses to their messages (Lin and Lundquist 2013; Rudder 2014). As sociologist Chandra Waring (2013) argues, the "exoticism" attached to mixed-race bodies is dependent upon how an individual's phenotype manages to blur racial categorization. She suggests that this type of exoticism is different from that of the primitive racial Other that Whites desire to consume for a "bit of spice" (hooks 1992); however, the attraction to, and sexual desire for, mixed-race people is rooted in understandings of – in Waring's case – blackness and whiteness (p. 116). To this end, sociologist Cynthia Feliciano (2016) states that despite the growth of the multiracial population, observers tend to place people – specifically online daters – in single race categories associating "medium" skin tones with Latinidad and dark skin tones with blackness (pp. 409-411).

The notion of the "good mix", according to sociologist Jin Haritaworn (2009), operates within an economy of heterosexual interracial attractiveness and empowers mixed-race people with white parentage at the expense of those without (p. 68). bell hooks (1992) frames this kind of appeal – in particular, the racialized sexual appeal – as a "conversion experience" that marginalizes the bodies of people of color as "alternative playgrounds" where members of dominant groups can affirm their power through intimate relationships with the Other (p. 23). Countless films, television shows and music videos suggest that not only is the mixed-race woman nice to look at, but she is a prime target for a sexual encounter. Films such as *Duel in the Sun* (1946), *Imitation of Life* (1934, 1959), *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995), or *Monster's Ball* (2001) portray mixed-race

women as hypersexual and consumable, with the camera directing the audience to linger its gaze over the partially clothed bodies of women who are rendered deviant through their sexuality, their blackness, or their perceived mental instability. Sociologist Gargi Bhattacharryya (1998) describes this as the "look" or "gaze," where women of color are made the target of visual objectification but are typically prevented from doing the "looking" themselves (pp. 97-140). Within this logic, mixed-race women, or women who at least appear to be mixed-race (what Tracy Sharpley-Whiting terms "ascriptive mulattas"), are sex goddesses that require constant surveillance and are often found to be employed in the sex-industry (Sharpley-Whiting 2007). In particular, fairer-skinned women, who are ethnically mixed or of indeterminate ethnic/racial origin, populate music videos, offering their long, straight or curly hair and curvy bodies as not only a stereotype of hypersexuality and sexual accessibility, but a specific type of "ideal" beauty (Sharpley-Whiting 2007, p. 27). This is what bell hooks (1992) describes as "selling hot pussy," with black women's bodies serving as sexualized signs that emphasize the expendability of black women's bodies (pp. 61-65) Mixed-race women embody not only the transgression of racial boundaries during eras of violation in the interest of asserting positions as colonizer or conqueror, but the articulation of sexual fantasies that were once taboo (hooks 1992; McClintock 1995).

In the midst of these sexual stereotypes, *sexual racism* has particularly been an issue in the realm of online dating, where users – rather than being free from the constraints of social structures of difference (Chow-White 2006) – must contend with power dynamics (Nakamura 2001, 2008) and objectification (Phua and Kaufman 2003;

Wilson et al. 2009). Legal scholar Sonu Bedi (2015) attests that sexual racism – the prioritizing of possible romantic partners in a way that reinforces racial hierarchies or racial stereotypes (Bedi 2015, p. 998) – is a matter of injustice, a reflection of the problematic conditions that structure society and an insidious issue that renders online dating websites as sites of public concern. Amidst this debate about whether racial preferences in romantic and sexual partners is equitable to so-called "generic racism" (Callander et al. 2015), it has even been suggested by some researchers (Wu et al. 2014) that those who date interracially are more attractive than those who date intraracially, thus creating allegedly more beautiful biracial children. This only serves to shore up the "biracial beauty myth" (Sims 2012) and put mixed-race people in a position to be fetishized. Because inferred beliefs and expectations about a given sexual experience are influenced by the race of those in the relationship (Wilson et al. 2009), sexual racism and racial fetishism more broadly are integral parts of dating experiences, whether on-line or not. Though it is possible that mixed-race people may not be viewed through a "primitive" lens, the discourses that construct their bodies as beautiful (Haritaworn 2009; Sharpley-Whiting 2007) do render mixed-race people as racial Others capable of providing pleasure and fulfilling fantasies (Bhattacharyya 1998; hooks 1992), especially the fantasy of color-blindness. Thus, it is necessary to further understand how mixed-race women sense that their bodies are being racially understood within their intimate relationships and illuminate the ways these women deal with existing racial dynamics within U.S. dating and marriage markets.

Research into the racial aspects of dating/marriage markets tend to focus on the prevalence of interracial relationships (intermarriage in particular) rather than how gender, sexuality, and (perceived) race come together to influence dating and marriage outcomes. This is particularly important in the face of recent research that suggests mixed-race people experience an increase in favorability in comparison to monoracial daters (Curington et al. 2015; Lewis 2013; McGrath et al. 2016; Rudder 2014). Courtney Bonam and Margaret Shih (2009) noted that the perception of a relationship as interracial for what they term a "biracial" person was heavily dependent on whether they viewed race as a social construction. Coming to the understanding that race is a social construction results from familial socialization and life experiences, which also determine mixed-race identity (Ahmed 1997; Ali 2003; Rockquemore et al. 2006; Song 2003; Zack 1994). Mixed-race individuals engage with others – in their dating lives or otherwise – based on the racial socialization strategy employed by their parents (Rockquemore et al. 2006). Rooted in a systemic understanding of race where identity is comprised of a combination of parental ideologies, societal categorization, and phenotype, it is suggested that if mixed-race children are not prepared for racial bias, are not provided with the cultural knowledge to make them "successful" people of color, or are not clear on what their racial membership is, it is likely they will be unsure of how to approach relationships with people, whether they share racial ancestry or not (Rockquemore et al. 2006). Twine (2010) would term this knowledge toolkit as *racial literacy*, which among other things, consists of an understanding that racial identity is a social practice, possession of a vocabulary to discuss race and racism, and the ability to interpret racial

codes and racialized practices. This is also indicative of *ethnic capital*, which Twine defines as knowledge – particularly about hair care and "heritage cooking" – that reinforces social and political connection to racialized communities. Twine notes that it is incumbent upon the parents (mainly white mothers) to foster this knowledge in their mixed-race children in order to enable them to function in society. Further, Debbie Storrs (2006) discusses the ways that mixed-race women in particular mobilize material culture in order to reaffirm their identity and to establish "authentic" relationships with others, especially knowledge of food culture. Therefore, various kinds of cultural capital – the characteristics that a person can amass or achieve that facilitates social mobility in a stratified society, such as education, intellect, or style of speech and dress – serve as a means to reaffirm multiracial identity and as a way to negotiate interactions with others.

Thus, the treatment of mixed-race people in their dating and married lives not only operates within a larger racialized system where even assumedly "progressive" interracial relationships are not exempt from problematic color-blind logic and sexual racism/fetishizing (Childs 2009; Frankenberg 1993; Nemoto 2009; Steinbugler 2012; Wilkins 2009) but one where any racial "Other" – even mixed-race people – can be marginalized by greater society. Though the Census has shown an increase in the number of interracial relationships since the 1967 *Loving v. The Commonwealth of Virginia* – with the United States seeing a 28 percent increase in interracial or interethnic opposite-sex married couples between 2000 and 2010 – the number of those who identify as mixed-race still comprises a marginal segment of the population – a mere 2.9 percent nationally in 2010. In fact, a 2010 U.S. Census brief on households and families showed

that nationally, 10 percent of all opposite-sex marriages had partners of "a different race or Hispanic origin," compared to 18 percent of opposite-sex unmarried partners and 21 percent of same-sex unmarried partners (Lofquist et al. 2012).

Possible racial identities are further constrained by notions like the one-drop rule (Song 2003; Zack 1994), where anyone with a "drop" of black ancestry is considered black (Wright 1994). There is no mixed-race community to become a part of akin to the "Asian-American" or "Latino/Hispanic" communities (Rockquemore et al. 2006), so, any relationship mixed-race individuals engage in is likely to be conceived of as interracial (or intraracial should an individual identify monoracially). Bonam and Shih (2009) note that while some mixed-race people may understand any intimate relationship to be "interracial," mixed-race people also seem to be more comfortable with interracial interactions as "levels" of intimacy increase. However, Bonam and Shih make the assumption that legal marriage is the most intimate form a relationship can take, failing to define what is meant by an "intimate" relationship at all. While it might be easier to survey "intimacy" based on marital status or lack thereof, several populations are eliminated because their intimate relationships do not reflect the standard that Bonam and Shih have set in "working together," "being friends," "dating," and "marrying" (p. 98-99). This demonstrates a need for an understanding of how mixed-race people are defining "different" race and how self-definitions of racial group membership impacts how mixed-race people view their intimate relationships.

The notion that mixed-race individuals are treated more "favorably" than their monoracial counterparts must be challenged**.** Historically, there are assumptions of

"hybrid vigor" that contribute to the notion that mixed-race people – women especially – are more attractive and desirable due to their "exotic" nature (Nakashima 1992; Sims 2012) and are representative of an ideal future (DaCosta 2007; Elam 2011). This notion is perpetuated in the idea of what constitutes a "good mix" (Haritaworn 2009), where certain mixtures are more appealing so long as they are mixed with white. Nakashima (1992) describes this look as an "Anglicized version of a person of color" while Haritaworn (2009) notes that this "good mix" requires lighter skin, a thin body-type, and European features. When "less desirable" features are present, they are blamed on the "minority" side and these physical features are verbally/visually excised out, invoking the history of hybrid degeneracy where mixed-race people were assumed to be monsters that pieced together disparate parts from each race (Haritaworn 2009).

In film and other media formats, mixed-race women in particular are portrayed as hypersexual and beautiful, but tragic, creatures, as can be seen most vividly in *Imitation of Life* (1934, 1959) and *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995) (Beltrán and Fojas 2008; Courtney 2005). Often, media representations of interracial relationships are portrayed as "doomed," even as they are representative of an idealized, color-blind future (Childs 2009; Courtney 2005). Sociologist Erica Chito Childs (2009) notes that though popular culture produces images and discourses that frame interracial love as a "mixed-race utopia, a spiral into chaos and squalor, or a temporary exotic diversion off the beaten path" (p. 4) we must acknowledge that a construction of interracial sexuality as deviant serves to reinforce power structures. From this, we can see how the symbolically erotic and taboo interracial sexual fantasies embodied by these portrayals get projected onto

mixed-race people (Beltrán and Fojas 2008; Sims 2012). Therefore, if one constitutes a "good mix" and fits into fetishized standards of attractiveness (Ali 2003; Beltrán and Fojas 2008; Childs 2009; Collins 2005; hooks 1992), especially if one is a woman, the individual will have a higher likelihood of experiencing more "favorable" treatment.

Further, the racial fetishes that inform interracial desire illustrate the power of gender in determining desirable sexuality and physical attractiveness. Sociologist Kumiko Nemoto (2009) notes that while Asian-American women are desired by white men as spouses due to their alleged hyperfemininity and idealized sexuality, Asian-American men do not experience the same degrees of desire, with their white female partners often engaging in racially essentialist discourses to explain why these men make (un)satisfactory partners. This logic plays on notions that Asian men are not sexually desirable. Women attempt to masculinize them with problematic discourses that suggest that their culture makes them inherently more patriarchal and oppressive, only serving to marginalize Asian men further as desirable partners. Successful interracial relationships require *racework*, according to sociologist Ann Steinbugler (2012), where boundaries of public and private must be negotiated and partners must perform emotional labor. Racework proves to be heavily gendered labor, whether in heterosexual or homosexual partnerships, suggesting that for any person – let alone a mixed-race woman – to achieve success in the dating and marriage market would also be dependent upon the way(s) in which she negotiates racial boundaries and the ability of herself and/or her partner to perform the necessary emotional labor of recognizing when discrimination happens and providing support. There are added issues with how these dynamics are negotiated due to

the fact that for multiracial people, race, nationality, and culture interconnect in complex ways. Across a number of sociological studies, mixed-race respondents will identify themselves using a combination of racial, ethnic, and nationalist language (see DaCosta 2007; Davenport 2016; Harris and Sim 2002; McGrath et al. 2016; Miyawaki 2016; Root 1990, 1992) sometimes even combining these terms into one term, as famed professional golfer, Tiger Woods, did with his portmanteau, "Cablinasian", in order to name his Caucasian, black, and Asian background (see Nishime 2012). Though nationality and culture become racialized when deployed in these ways, it is also important to note that self-identifications that include labels such as "Persian" and "Mexican" serve as a way to connote difference within a U.S. racial structure that (at least in an official sense) will understand these identities as falling under the realm of whiteness.

Therefore, I am reminded that in the United States, racial hierarchy privileges whites and "honorary whites" over most of the collective black population (Bonilla-Silva 2013). The privileging of whites and honorary whites is dependent upon not only a racist social structure, but also a politics of respectability that is often associated with certain groups. Sociologist Yen Le Espiritu (2001) discusses the attempts by Filipina-Americans to establish a degree of sexual and moral superiority over whites by subscribing to the belief that the white women "sleep around" whereas Filipinas are chaste. Other marginalized populations have adopted this strategy of moral superiority as a means of coping with an oppressive social structure. However, in the case of Filipinas and other Asian-American women and dating or marriage, being perceived as chaste and more

feminine may actually make these women more desirable than those who are above them in the racial hierarchy.

Other women must cope with sexualized stereotypes, such as the "hot and spicy Latina" or the hypersexual Jezebel (Beltrán and Fojas 2008; Childs 2009; Collins 2005; hooks 1992); the racialized sexuality of black and Latino individuals has an impact on the perception of mixed-race individuals with black or Latino parents (Feliciano 2016; Feliciano and Kizer 2016). While these sexual stereotypes may make these mixed-race individuals more appealing to "ethnosexual adventurers" (Nagel 2003) whom have little intention of seriously dating or marrying them, these notions have the potential of increasing their appeal, if only for the fulfillment of some fantasy (Alexander 2006; Battle and Barnes 2009; Courtney 2005; hooks 1992; Kempadoo 1999). However, it is unlikely that these racialized and gendered sexual stereotypes result in actual increased opportunities outside of the "same race", depending on how these mixed-race individuals are racially "read" and how they identify. As sociologists Ken-Hou Lin and Jennifer Lindquist (2013) demonstrate, white men and women are least likely to respond to messages from black men and women while white men are more receptive of messages from Asian and Latina women. A number of factors come into play to determine how a mixed-race woman will be treated when trying to find dating partners and this is heavily dependent upon phenotype, degree of racial fetishization, and likely to an extent, investment in culturally specific knowledge (Rockquemore et al. 2006). The "exoticness" of a mixed-race individual as a potential partner increases if she has cultural knowledge –

such as speaking a language other than English or being able to dance – that can be deployed to shore up a particular racial identity or stereotype.

Identifying with a combination of two or more racial groups that are "at odds" could increase a mixed-race person's chances for rejection when trying to locate dating partners. Particularly, a male mixed-race individual whose racial identities are associated with "undesirable" sexual stereotypes – half-Asian for instance, which is a feminized sexuality, and half-Latino, which is perceived as misogynistic – would potentially run into difficultly finding success in dating. However, individuals who have "diluted" their racial ancestry (Haritaworn 2009) are more likely to be found appealing compared to those of monoracial ancestry. This appeal is aided by cultural assimilation to dominant (white) U.S. culture, as well as an incorporation of racial, ethnic, cultural, and nationalist identities to explain individual backgrounds. As much as a combination of identities – such as "Filipina" and "white" – enables a person to make sense of their individual identity, it also communicates something about that person to others. Yet, the potential for rejection seems more likely for a mixed-race man than a mixed-race woman, as the majority of the stereotypes involved in mixed-race fetishism assume a female body as the object of sexual and racial fetishization (Beltrán and Fojas 2008; Collins 2005; Courtney 2005; hooks 1992) whereas men of color are objectified as hypersexual beasts or as criminals (Collins 2005) – not typically ideal for dating or marriage.

Conclusion

As Allison McGrath and colleagues (2016) argue, studies of the dating preferences of mixed-race people in the United States remain underdeveloped (p. 1921). Based on the gaps in the broader sociological literature in regards to dating and marriage markets – particularly a dearth of attention paid to how self-identified multiracial and multiethnic people are impacting the racialized dynamics of these markets – and how sexual racism and intimacy intersect in every day life (beyond observed trends in online desirability), this dissertation has several implications for sociological understandings of the politics of race, gender, sexuality and class in the contemporary United States. Specifically, this dissertation addresses the following questions: First, what are the perceived raced, gendered, sexualized, and classed contexts in which self-identified mixed-race women are attempting to pursue and maintain romantic and sexual relationships? Secondly, how do mixed-race women make decisions on how to present themselves both on and off-line, and what constraints to they believe exist? And lastly, how are mixed-race women experiencing on-line dating websites and what aspects of these on-line experiences carry over into off-line relationships? In asking what meaning race has for mixed-race women in their intimate relationships and where mixed-race women feel that they fit in the racial hierarchy of the United States, the following chapters illuminate what the dating lives of mixed-race women look like, how these women negotiate notions of desirability, and how logics of a mythical color-blindness operate in mixed-race women's romantic lives.

One important aspect of this study is how it enables an assessment of how self-identified mixed-race people are impacting and understanding the racialized dynamics of dating and marriage markets and how sexual racism and intimacy intersect in everyday life. This dissertation expands understandings of the racialized, gendered, sexualized, and classed contexts that multiracial and multiethnic women contend with when pursuing heterosexual relationships, aiding in the clarification of the ways that mixed-race people specifically, and racialized people more broadly, deal with race in their intimate lives. This is particularly evident in the ways that my respondents deploy racial, ethnic, cultural, and nationalist identities as part of their conceptualization of their self-identified mixed-race identities. Assessing the options available to mixed-race women in terms of how to present themselves on- and off-line extends sociological knowledge of the lived-experience of race, as well as knowledge of how race, gender, sexuality, and class interact on the Internet, especially as online dating becomes more prevalent.

In the next chapter, I detail my methodological approach for executing this study, including the utilization of digital ethnography, in-depth interviewing, content analysis, and the methodological practice I developed, which I term platform elicitation.

CHAPTER 2

STUDYING LOVE ON-LINE: A DIGITAL METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In this chapter, I detail the methodological approaches that enabled me to amass and analyze the variety of data included in this study. Below, I describe this dissertation's research design and analysis practices, concluding with some reflections on reflexivity and the impact of my presence as a woman who identifies as multiracial on my experiences while collecting data and subsequently, on my findings. I began this project with an interest in understanding how multiracial and multiethnic women construct and perceive race within their own intimate relationships in order to shed light on how those who both self-identify and are perceived as "mixed-race" understand themselves and their position in society. I aimed to discover how their experiences might fit within wider U.S. cultural narratives surrounding interracial relationships and the creation of mixed-race families as inherently "progressive" and/or arbiters of the "post-racial" future. As a litany of evidence continues to show that race has significant impacts on contemporary dating dynamics (Lin and Lundquist 2013; McGrath et al. 2015; Rafalow et al. 2017; Rudder 2014, etc.), I took my cue from recent academic and mainstream articles as well as books that proclaim the uniqueness of the experiences of mixed-race people, particularly in regards to their greater attractiveness and alleged greater success in online dating. My focus on multiracial and multiethnic women in this project stems not only from existing research but personal conversations with other mixed-race women and my own previous work.

Research Design and Analysis

This study utilizes several methodological approaches to gain an understanding of what multiracial women in three Texas urban metropolitan areas experience when dating, specifically when using online dating platforms such as *OkCupid*. I combine digital ethnography, content analysis, in-depth interviewing, and an observation technique I term platform elicitation in order to illustrate the ways that race and gender work together to inform these experiences. In the work that follows, I focus on the experiences of the cisgender women that I interviewed in the interest of acknowledging the differences in the experiences of race and gender between cis- and transwomen. Throughout this text, I refer to my respondents as "women" not to intentionally engage in a cisnormative practice but rather to simplify my language.

The Case: Selection of Southeast Texas and OkCupid

The bulk of the research involving mixed-race people in the United States occurs in areas that are noted for their large mixed-race populations, such as California, Hawaii, or Washington State (see reports from Census Bureau, as well as literature from Chapter 1). So, locating this project in Texas provides a different context in which to analyze how (mixed-)race is constructed and understood. Texas has an extensive history with mixed-race populations, due to its unique role in the expansion of the U.S. Southwest. Texas has long been a culturally and racially diverse place, even before colonization (Acosta and Winegarten 2003). However, the specific connections to *mestizaje* – a concept historically used in Latin American and some Caribbean countries to refer to racial and/or

cultural mixture – and *la frontera* – the "borderlands" region of Texas in the Rio Grande Valley (Anzaldúa 2007) provide a context that is not found in many other parts of the United States. While the three cities I analyze are not located in the Valley they have a close enough proximity that influences these cities culturally, notably as a result of migration from residents in the Valley to major cities. Additionally, the three Texas cities I chose for analysis – Austin, Houston, and San Antonio – are located in the southeastern region of the state and comprise some of the fastest growing cities in the nation and among the fastest growing/largest cities in the state of Texas (see Figure 2.1). Though there was little difference in the experiences that women described *between* these three cities, aside from factors such as navigating extensive sprawl in Houston and San Antonio, the women I spoke with did note that dating in an urban location differed from the small towns and more rural areas where some of my respondents had lived. In fact, many women had resided in all three cities at some point, moving for jobs, for college, or in some instances, for relationships. While there may not have been significant differences in the quality of dating experiences between the cities where I conducted this study, there is evidence that an urban metropolitan dating experience is markedly different from other places as supported by research that discusses the importance of online dating websites for people in small towns and rural areas who have significantly less dense dating pools (Ansari and Kleinberg 2015; Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012). Also of note is that as of the 2010 Census, the number of individuals identifying as "two or more races" in these metro-areas exceeds the national population of 2.9 percent and the state-wide population of 2.7 percent: Austin (3.4 percent), Houston (3.3 percent), and San

Antonio (3.4 percent). Further, the state of Texas' 31.9 percent change in its mixed-race population between 2000 and 2010 mirrors the national change of 32 percent (U.S. Census Bureau).

Figure 2.1 – Map of Research Locations

Source: Google Maps

I selected *OkCupid* as the dating site to facilitate this analysis for several reasons. First, it is one of the largest and most popular dating websites on the internet with over 4 million active monthly users (Rudder 2014). *OkCupid*, launched in 2004, does not

require a membership fee unlike some of its competitors such as *Match* or *eHarmony*. Interestingly, high-profile dating sites *Match*, *OkCupid*, and matching-app *Tinder* are all owned by the umbrella company, Match Group, which claimed a total of over 59 million active users, with 4.7 million paying users as of 2015. Currently, the online dating industry is inundated with subscriber-driven websites, smart phone-exclusive applications (downloaded via "app stores" like iTunes) and even matchmaking "shows" that are hosted with regularity on various social media platforms, such as *Twitter*. While the emergence of technology assisted dating practices dates back several decades to matchmaking services based on written letters and compatibility tests (Slater 2014), the cornucopia of options available to singles at present makes earlier modes of matchmaking seem quite ordinary. This availability of free dating platforms like *OkCupid* allows for a greater variety of users who might be dissuaded by a financial obligation, as even old matchmaking systems or personal ads in newspapers incurred a fee. Further, the fact that *OkCupid* is free, and in this age of smartphone technology has apps for phones, Kindles, and tablets, makes it extremely accessible particularly to younger demographics who are more astute and comfortable with using technology. Though there are many older users of on-line dating websites, the rise in "digital dating" is rooted in the way in which it makes dating possibilities seem "endless" (Slater 2014). *OkCupid* also is one of the few major mainstream websites that allows users to identify as "straight," "gay," "lesbian," or "bisexual." Most dating websites ask a user to identify as "looking for" men or women and then limits the possibilities for viewing to only their chosen orientation. *OkCupid*, by

contrast, also aims to facilitate "friendships" in addition to dating, so users can "look for" any gender they wish through the search mechanism.

OkCupid's racial identification categories most closely mimic the U.S. Census Bureau; many other dating sites, such as *Plenty Of Fish*, use a catchall category of "mixed" for mixed-race/multiethnic users. However, unlike with *OkCupid*, there is no way to know what these individuals are claiming to be "mixed" with, which creates a lot of ambiguity about what mixedness means to these users and the users who are visiting their profiles. Despite my focus on *OkCupid* in the interest of specificity, I did take time to ask respondents about other websites or dating apps that they may have used in the past or were using in tandem with *OkCupid* at the time of the interview. This allowed for me to understand how *OkCupid* compared to other online dating platforms in these women's view, specifically the ways in which it was similar, how it differed, and which sites were preferred or served as the primary means of locating people to date. However, due to the fact that I did not study competitor sites for this project, I have no means of knowing whether my results would be the same. Based on what my respondents shared with me, I believe the most significant differences would have been seen on sites that cater exclusive to gay, lesbian, and/or transgender users (such as *Scruff*, *Grindr*, *Adam4Adam*, *HER*, or *TransgenderDate*), dating sites with explicit religious affiliations (such as *JDate* for Jewish users, *Christian Mingle* for Christian users, or *Hipster Shaadi* for Muslim daters), or kink sites like *FetLife*. However, most of my respondents had experience with at least one other dating site that fell in these categories, as well as experience with a variety of both free and subscription-based accounts. Their assertion

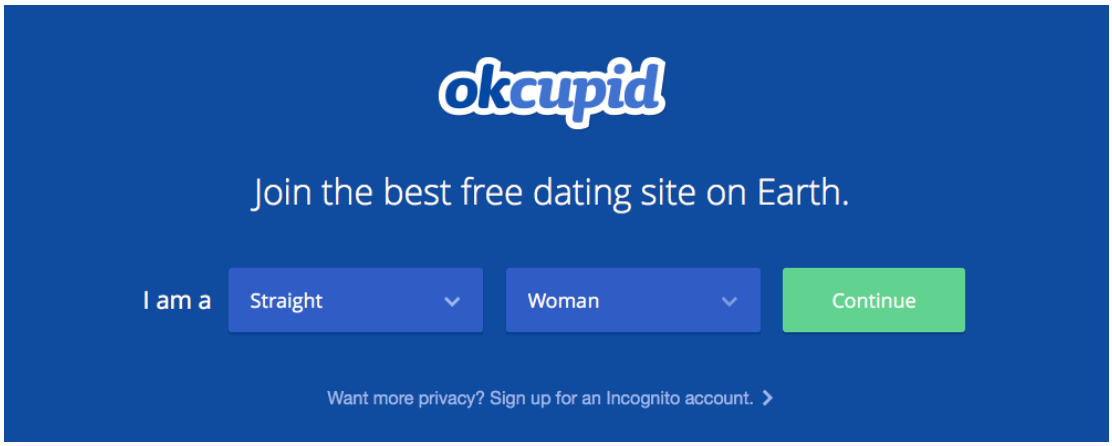
that the variability between platforms was mostly rooted in interface design and the population of other users suggests that my findings are a fairly accurate and consistent representation of the online dating experience more broadly.

Digital Ethnography

On the homepage of the online dating website *OkCupid*, visitors are greeted by the phrase, "Join the best free dating site on Earth," posted above drop down menus set at their default categories of "Straight" and "Woman" (see Figure 2.2). Here, *OkCupid* makes assumptions about who their visitor(s) might be and who that person might be interested in; the fact that the default categories suggest that a visitor is likely to be a heterosexual woman would make one assume that women – particularly straight women – are more likely to be users of *OkCupid*. This, of course, is not necessarily true, as a 2010 analysis of singles by age illustrates that women user and male user ratios fluctuate depending on age (Rudder 2010). According to this assessment, women users are more common between the ages 18-23 and ages 38 and above, while male users outnumber women between ages 23 and 38. This is significant considering that the number of overall singles on *OkCupid* peaks around age 24, dropping steeply until about age 34 and then evening out (Rudder 2010). So, because *OkCupid* skews younger in terms of users, it makes sense that women might be viewed as the more likely user. In order to better understand how mixed-race women are using and experiencing the online dating website, *OkCupid*, but more broadly, the lived-experiences of [mixed-race] people who are using

the internet to supplement and/or facilitate their dating lives, I used an approach understood as *digital ethnography*. Digital ethnography is a method that utilizes aspects

Figure 2.2 – Screenshot from *OkCupid*'s main homepage

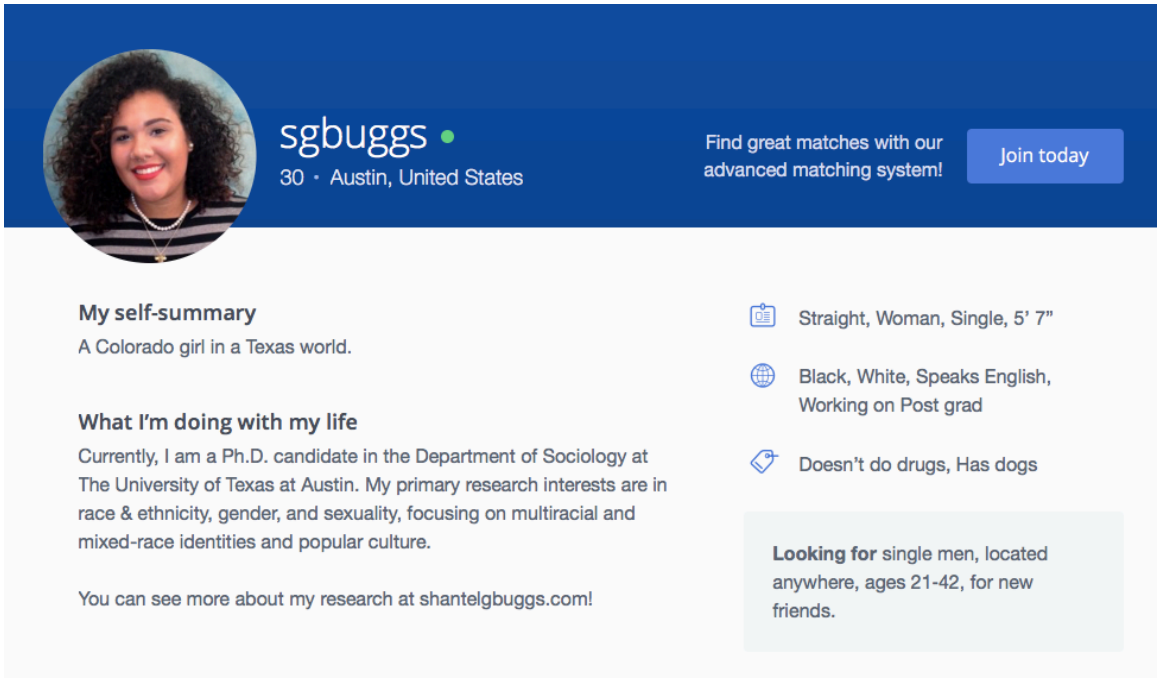


of what sociologist Dhiraj Murthy (2008) terms "physical" ethnography in the accessing and studying of online spaces such as social networking websites and blogs. Murthy notes that the presence of ethnographers studying virtual field sites is "physically invisible" due to most researchers reading – and not posting on – blogs or remaining anonymous participants in chat rooms or forums (p. 840). The method recognizes that the Internet is not a "neutral" observation space and that researchers bring with them biases and assumptions in their analyses (Murthy 2008). However, there is much we can learn about the dynamics of our social world based on how people are using the internet and how they move between online interactions and so-called "real" world interactions. As Murthy notes, race, gender, sexuality, and disability do not "disappear in cyberspace"

(841). Further, there is significant potential for a researcher to fall into a "passive" observer role, exploiting online data by never gaining permission to quote postings (Murthy 2008). So, while digital ethnography certainly covers all of my observations as a "participant-observer" it is also inclusive of my content analyses and the user observation/platform elicitation I utilized during my in-depth interviews in order to see how women were looking at profiles on *OkCupid* and how they navigated the platform. Murthy (2008) notes that the drawback of studying social media in particular is that membership tends to be restricted to digital "haves" – meaning those with at least digital social capital – and that ethnic and gender digital divides can be hard to overcome (p. 845). Over the year and a half that I spent engaged in data collection for this project, I became familiar with how to construct a profile on *OkCupid*, how to utilize various components of the site such as Quick Match – an application within the platform that allows users to quickly sort through "matches" determined by algorithms, swiping left to reject a person or swiping right to accept them – the various filters available in the Search mechanism based on characteristics such as "Background" (race/ethnicity, religion, or language), "Looks" (height, attractiveness or body type) and "Vices" (smoking, drinking, or doing drugs), what benefits may result from subscribing to "A-list" – a paid service within *OkCupid* where users who pay a variety of monthly fees receive extra benefits, such as browsing without ads, additional message storage, the ability to know when messages have been read or "boosting" ones profile during "peak" use hours – and other nuances of messaging, live chatting, and communicating via profiles.

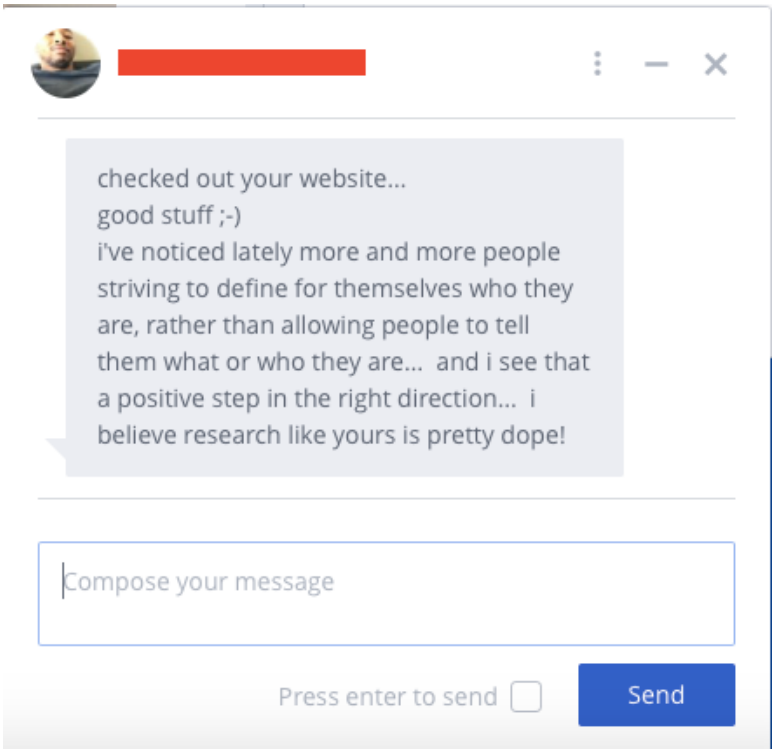
In addition, by creating a "research" profile – using a photo of myself that I used on my other professional websites and explicitly naming myself as a doctoral candidate at The University of Texas at Austin (see Figure 2.3) – I simultaneously made myself "visible" as a researcher while also invading a space where people were looking to find people to date. After my first few interviews mentioned concerns about whether I was a "catfish" – an internet slang term for a person who creates an online identity that does not match who they are in "real" life, often an identity stolen from an already existing person – I added additional professional photos of myself, including "selfies" – self-portraits taken with a self-facing camera on a cell phone – seated at my desk, in order to assuage concerns that I was not who I said I was. For this reason, I also made sure that I had a

Figure 2.3 – Screenshot of Researcher Profile on *OkCupid*



very strong online presence, with a public *Twitter* account, my personal website, my department profile page, a *Linked In* account and an *Academia.edu* page. Though most of these accounts already existed before I started my research, I made sure to link them all to each other in order to comfort respondents who looked me up. Though I stated upfront that I was a doctoral student, my research profile received many unsolicited messages from male users despite my never looking at men's profiles nor filling out any of the match questions that *OkCupid*'s algorithms rely upon. Only one user during the entire period that I conducted this research noted that he had actually gone to my website,

Figure 2.4 – Message from Male User to Researcher Profile

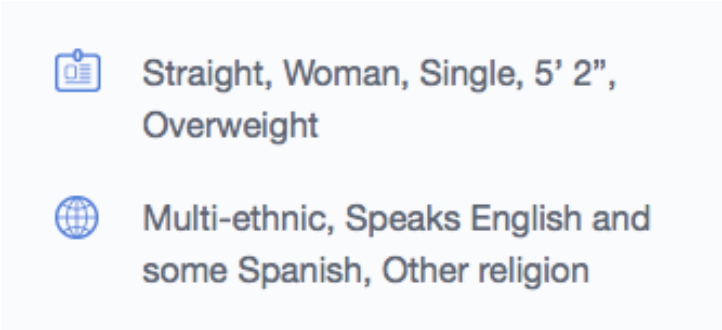


which I linked to in my profile, and read about my research (see Figure 2.4). The experience of being sent messages that demonstrated that these men did not actually read my profile gave me insight into the ways that many women I spoke with had to deal with messages from users who clearly did not put in the effort to read their essays. Further, much of my knowledge of user profiles – particularly the changes that *OkCupid* made to the platform's appearance and where information was located was gleaned through the setting up of my own researcher profile as well as data collection and analysis.

Content analysis – specifically a discourse and visual text assessment – of 225 dating profiles collected from active users between April and July 2015 and the recruitment of 30 interviewees between June 2015 and June 2016 only increased the amount of time I spent on the website and phone application. Because I spent over a full calendar year collecting data from *OkCupid*, I was able to witness the significant rearranging of the ways that the platform displays race and other racializing characteristics that occurred in December 2015 (see Figures 2.5 and 2.6), where users went from having every box they checked showing up on a side menu in the profile to any number of selections over two becoming a "multi-ethnic" category.

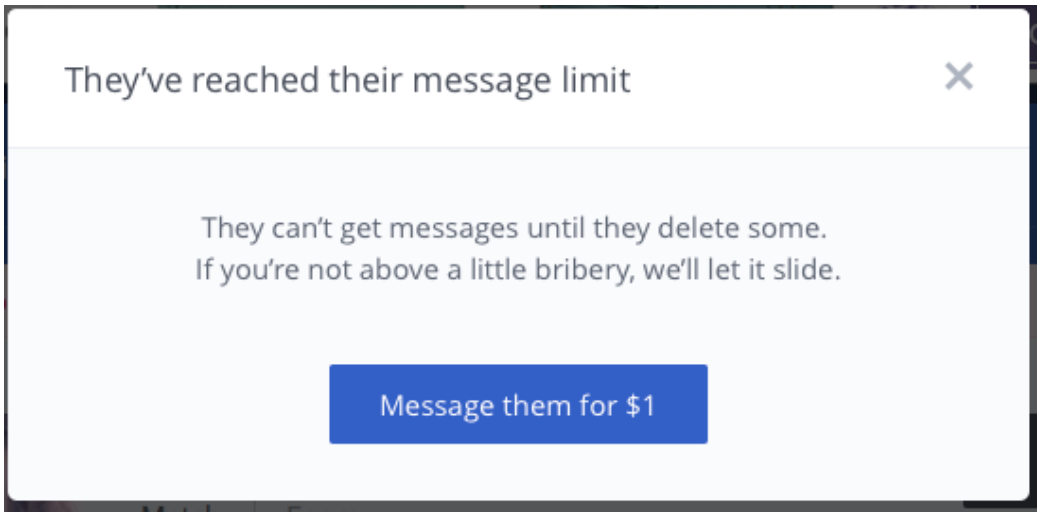
Figure 2.5 – Screenshot of Display of Race ("Ethnicity") Prior to December 2015

Figure 2.6 – Screenshot of Display of Race ("Ethnicity") After December 2015



It remains unclear why *OkCupid* made this format change and despite several requests for an interview with the platform's press office, I have no way at present of finding out. The changes to the profile layout were made with zero media fanfare; in fact, several of the women I had interviewed post-change had not even noticed until I mentioned it. So, becoming somewhat integrated into the space of *OkCupid* – despite not messaging anyone but potential interviewees and not answering any match questions – I came to understand a lot about the day to day experiences of those who use *OkCupid* regularly and message many people in one day. In fact, because I had been using the messaging system to recruit interviewees, I discovered that *OkCupid* charges users a fee to message users who have "full" inboxes (see Figure 2.7)!

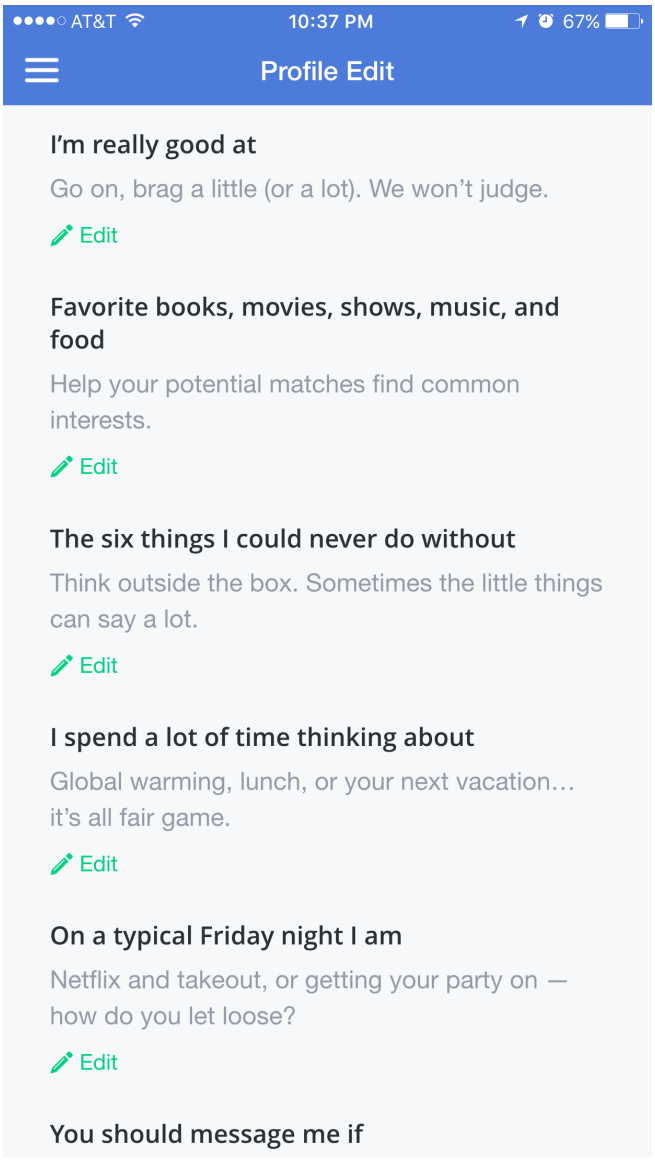
Figure 2.7 – Screenshot of Full Inbox Message on *OkCupid*



Content Analysis

As noted above, between late-April and early-July 2015 I collected 225 profiles for content analysis from the three cities I selected for this project. Profiles were "collected" by using the search mechanisms to look for active accounts of women users interested in men within 25 to 50 mile radiuses of Austin, Houston, or San Antonio. Different users access sites like *OkCupid* at different times of the day (Klein et al. 2010); in order to get a better sense of the women who use this particular on-line dating platform, I logged in to search for profiles at four different times: in the afternoon (between 1pm-4pm), in the morning (between 8am-11am), during the "graveyard shift" (11pm-2am), and in the evening (between 6pm-9pm). I followed this routine for each city, spreading out my searches as it became clear when I started collecting profiles that it would take several weeks to collect enough profiles per city to reach my 225 profile

Figure 2.8 – Screenshot of *OkCupid* Profile Essay Prompts



threshold. Despite logging on at a variety of times, there were some weeks where I struggled to come across new users whose profiles I had not already collected for analysis. I maintained a spreadsheet of each profile I had visited by screen name in order to avoid collecting the same profiles more than once. Profiles were downloaded as a PDF,

with each individual photo that women posted in their "Profile Photos" downloaded as a screenshot image. All of these files were numbered according to the coding file number associated with the screen name in my spreadsheet (again, to make sure that I did not repeat users when collecting and analyzing profiles). In accordance with the approval I received from The University of Texas at Austin's Institutional Review Board (IRB) in February 2015, no profiles are reproduced in this text. Because *OkCupid*'s profiles can be "browsed" by individuals who do not have an account, the profiles I analyze are technically "publicly available" in that the information I glean from them is not contingent upon my being a member of *OkCupid*. Though more targeted searches – e.g. for race, education, income – require signing up for an account, these were not a part of my search practices for this stage of the project. Similar analysis of dating profiles include content analysis of gay men's profiles on the website *Adam4Adam* (Robinson 2015) and analyses of a dataset comprised of observer assessments of the dating website *Match*'s profile photos for white, black, Latino/a and multiracial daters (Feliciano 2016; Feliciano and Kizer 2016). However, few studies that engage in an assessment of online profiles also put those findings into conversation with interview data, a practice that proved important to contextualizing this study's findings.

While collecting profiles, I focused on users who explicitly identified with either two or more racial categories or "Other" on their profiles. Due to the fact that I would have to click on every profile that came up and then look to see how that person had racially identified, I would continue searching during each session until 25 profiles had been collected. Collection sessions ranged from a minimum of two hours to a maximum

of four hours, averaging three hours to collect 25 profiles for a given city. A "complete" profile includes at least one clear photo of the individual's face and has filled in at least half of the available essay prompts in a standard profile (i.e., "My self summary", "What I'm doing with my life" or "The six things I could never do without"). Though there is limited literature examining presentation of self on online dating websites in particular, it is suggested that the goal of most online daters is ultimately an intimate relationship (Ellison et al. 2006). These individuals will likely be more motivated to engage in "authentic self-disclosure" (Gibbs et al. 2006), which is best articulated through a completed profile. I was not concerned about profile "deception" – instances of identity manipulation due to increased opportunities for less honest self-presentation – (Brym and Lenton 2001; Gibbs et al. 2006) during this collection period and more interested in how the profiles I end up locating (re)present "mixedness." I expected that not all profiles included in my data collection would be "complete"; however, I did make a point of selecting profiles that had at least one photo (despite ultimately, that not being a necessity during my data collection).

Focusing on Discourse

The primary means of focusing my content analysis was a focus on discourse – in the form of written essays on user profiles based on several prompts (see Figure 2.8) – and images – in the form of whatever photographs the user chose to post, either of themselves, their pets, various places, or members of their family or social circle. *Discourse analysis* – with "discourse" referring to various forms of talk, image, and text

– is an analytical approach that revolves around the central ideas that a) language is not a neutral means of describing or reflecting the world but rather is imbued with socially constructed meanings and b) frames discourse itself as a form of action (Gill 2000). Visual analysis operates under the understanding that forms of visual representation – photography, film, television, the internet, virtual reality, etc. – constitute different ways of recording and documenting our social lives (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, p. 50). As Harper (in Denzin and Lincoln, 2003) notes, the social power involved in making images (re)defines institutions, groups, and individuals (pp. 176-180); therefore, my analysis explores not only the words that mixed-race women use to define themselves, but the visual elements that both document certain aspects of these women's lives and communicate something about them as people. The visual element is particularly important here due to the ways in which phenotype impacts notions like "attractiveness" and how certain bodies are racially categorized. As virtually all the women I spoke with mentioned, the photos chosen for a profile are important in terms of what they convey about the users these women might be interested in as well as what kinds of users will be interested in these women.

I coded the various profile components – essays and photos – in ATLAS.ti, looking at how these profiles represent the women who created them. As Kathy Charmaz (2006) argues, theoretical sampling is "not about representing a population or increasing the statistical generalizability of your results" (p. 101); thus, I cannot explain how *all* mixed-race women represent their racial identities in their dating profiles. I do, however, reflect on how "mixedness" articulates itself in these particular profiles and how the users

who created them may or may not engage with larger societal narratives about mixed-race. My analysis was initially guided by the following questions: Are the images in color? How is the individual's hair styled? What clothes are they wearing/what activities are they engaging in? Do they discuss their ancestry or their parents' racial backgrounds? Do they utilize phrases that emphasize the "beauty" of mixed girls? Do they talk about curly hair or other allegedly defining features of mixed people? Do they reference being the "best of both worlds" or some other similar notion? After themes were identified, these themes were put in conversation with interview data where women described how they went about building their profiles, connecting trends in the content analysis to what women indicated as being the most important when crafting their own profiles *and* when looking at the profiles of others.

In terms of understanding how my respondents "do" race online and how they present themselves, I rely on the in-depth interviews (detailed below) to provide context for the findings of this content analysis. I recognize that it is likely that some women's photos will appear "lighter" or possibly adjusted by some filter or other kind of photo-altering technology and that this will be racialized, particularly for those women who are not socially-constructed as conventionally attractive. However, as I have no means of knowing the thought-processes behind the profiles I analyzed for content, I cannot with any accuracy identify those profiles that engaged in image manipulation.

In-depth Interviews

In total, I conducted 30 in-depth interviews with self-identified multiracial and multiethnic women who resided in Austin, Houston, and San Antonio, Texas at the time of the interview. Though one of the 30 interviews I conducted was with a transwoman – Nina, a 39-year old who identified as both Latina and as having a mixed black, indigenous, and white background – the analysis included in this text focuses on the 29 ciswomen that I interviewed. I recognize that this practice reifies cisgender experiences as the norm; though it is not my intention to contribute to a widespread practice of cisnormativity, I also want to acknowledge that there are specific ways in which race, gender, sexuality, and class intersect in the experiences of transwomen that are not the same for cisgender women. In order to not gloss over these nuances, I do not include analysis of Nina's experiences; however, I do hope to write separately about the details of her romantic life that she shared with me.

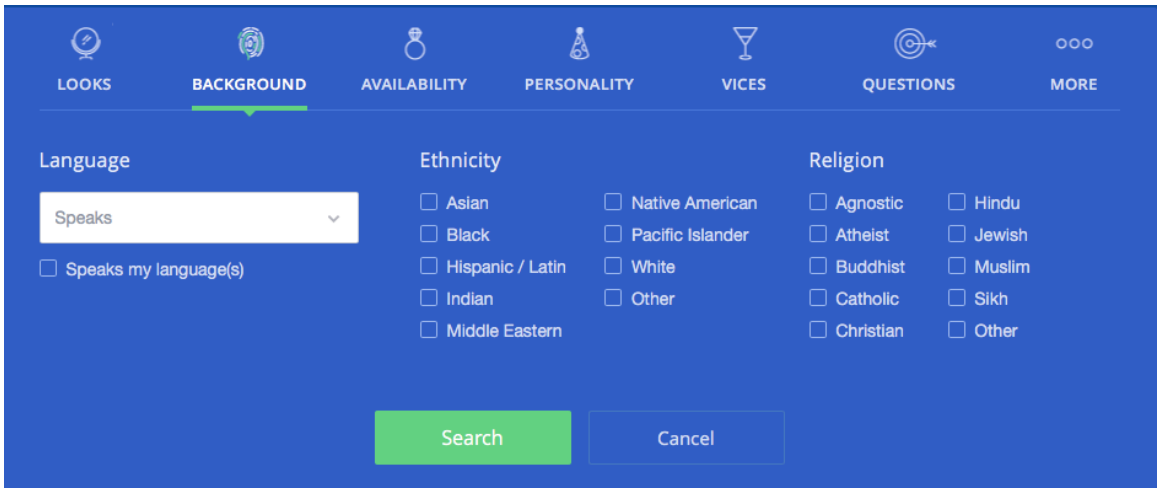
I selected in-depth interviews as one of my primary methods due to the fact that nearly every recent study of race and online dating focuses on so-called big data, analyzing large scale trends in user behavior based on profile ratings and frequency of messaging (see Curington et al. 2015; Feliciano 2016; Lin and Lundquist 2013, 2015; McGrath et al. 2016; Rudder 2014). I wanted to hear from the women who used online dating to meet people and let them tell me what they thought was going on in these online spaces. Interviews are an extremely common means of acquiring information; however, due to the fact that interviews are not "neutral" tools of data (Fontana and Frey 2003) scholars like Colin Jerolmack and Shamus Khan (2014) have advocated for recognition

that "talk is cheap" and that ethnographers cannot solely depend on what respondents say to provide the full story. It is recommended that interviews focus on the "how" – what Andrea Fontana and James Frey describe as the "constructive work involved in producing order in everyday life" (p. 62) – and the "what" – the activities of everyday life (p. 62). Further, some scholars (Oakley 1981, for instance) argue that in-depth interviews are unethical due to their tendency to reduce respondents to objects rather than human beings. I contend with these methodological and ethical concerns by first recognizing that I can only attest to what my respondents say rather than what they do (aside from actions I directly observed as part of the platform elicitation method, described later in this chapter). Secondly, I provided my respondents with an opportunity to ask me questions at the end of every interview, turning the tables on myself while also creating opportunities to learn new information about the women I interviewed.

For recruitment, I utilized *OkCupid*'s search mechanism in order to locate women with active profiles, selecting one of the given cities and setting a search radius between 25 and 50 miles away. Due to the fact that there are innumerable possibilities for racial and ethnic identity based on *OkCupid*'s available categories (see Figure 2.9), I opted to look for a) women, who were b) interested in men, who had c) been online in the past week. Though *OkCupid* allows users to identify with a variety of sexual orientations and gender identities, I focused my analysis on those who identify as women who are seeking heterosexual relationships through the website because it allows me to engage with literatures on dating, marriage, and family formation that are grounded in the heterosexual experience. To this end, however, my selection of women who were

interested in men did not select for women who were *exclusively* interested in men; thus, my sample included women who identified as heterosexual or straight (N = 18) and bisexual and/or pansexual (N = 12). Using *OkCupid*'s messaging system with a standard script, I contacted self-identified women that I located through the website's search mechanism and identified myself as a doctoral student doing research at The University of Texas at Austin (see complete script in Appendix). By sampling from women who

Figure 2.9 – Screenshot of *OkCupid* Search Mechanism (Post-December 2015)



had active accounts at the time of data collection, I believe this strategy was more effective than snowball sampling (as other studies of mixed-race people have done, such as Renn 2004, Root 1990, and Twine 2010). Because none of my participants knew each other, I avoided having interviewees who were too similar to each other and who could create bias in my sample (Small 2009). I conducted all interviews in person, traveling to the respective cities to meet with participants in locations of their choosing. Interviews

ranged from two hours to four and a half hours in length, averaging two and a half hours. All interviews were recorded using a digital recorder, which respondents consented to as part of their informed consent, and I transcribed all interviews myself. The vast majority of my interviews took place in a coffee shop (N = 25), with the others occurring in a restaurant, a grocery store "café" or other public spaces (N = 5). In asking the women I interviewed to select a place where they would be comfortable meeting a stranger and where we could hear each other talk, they often selected a place where they tend to meet first-dates from *OkCupid* and other online dating platforms. In the instance of one interview – with Audre, a 23-year-old who identified as black and Creole/white – the interview was not just the two of us as she had invited a date *to* the interview without my knowledge. Jason, a 26-year-old that Audre had met the week prior on *OkCupid*, showed up about 10 minutes into my conversation with Audre and sat with us for the full 3-hour interview answering virtually all the questions I had for Audre (with some additions to account for why he decided to come to this interview and what he took away from this experience).

Though this interview ended up creating a situation that changed up my methodology a bit – I had to arrange a follow up interview with Audre to ask questions that she seemed uncomfortable answering in Jason's presence in addition to seeing how things went with her and Jason after I left them alone – this interview provided a great deal of insight into the things that women described to me about their first meetings in-person. Overall, these interviews asked women about the messages they receive from society and their families regarding dating – e.g. who to date, is race a significant issue –

their past dating experiences, what motivated them to join an online dating website, and their dating experiences while using the website (see full interview schedule in the Appendix). Initially, all interviews were only recorded for the duration of the questions that were part of my interview schedule; any conversation that followed was not recorded, but instead was written about in my post-interview field notes. After two interviews like this, it became clear that I was missing important data by turning the recorder off and trying to rely on my memory alone for the field notes. So, I left the recorder on for the duration of my interactions with my interviewees, letting respondents know at the end of the official interview questions that we could turn the recorder off if they wished to do so. This led to interviews extending in length by anywhere from 30 minutes to several additional hours, depending on how many questions respondents had for me or what additional stories they wished to share. Often, respondents were interested in hearing more about my personal dating experiences and how I came to develop my personal racial identity, or, as I got deeper into data collection, what I had been finding in my interviews up to that point. Their curiosity would lead to their expanding on topics they had brought up during the interview proper. I maintained participant confidentiality by protecting all documents that contain information that can be used to identify my participants, in addition to utilizing pseudonyms to conceal identities in written text(s).

Because I could not search for mixed-race users specifically, it was necessary to keep the search categories as broad as possible. For example, if one were to be looking for "black and white" women only, clicking the "black" and "white" tabs would bring up any user who had clicked *either* of those categories, not only those who had chosen both.

Thus, strictly white-identified or strictly black-identified women would come up in this search, as well as any women who may have clicked one or more of the available racial categories on *OkCupid*. For example, were one to do a search just for "white" users, women who had chosen "white" as at least one of their racial identifiers would show up in the search results. I maintained a spreadsheet of all users I contacted by username in order to keep track of how many women I had messaged and which women I had already messaged previously who had not responded to my initial recruitment invitation. In total, I messaged 417 women across all three cities that had identified themselves with at least two of the available categories, including those who identified as just "Other."

In terms of my interactions with respondents, the researcher profile I created became somewhat contentious due to the fact that *OkCupid* requires that a user list whom he or she is interested in. As a queer woman, I wanted to be honest and initially put on my profile that I was bisexual. While I did get women to respond to my requests for interviews, several of my early message exchanges involved women expressing their concern that before reading my message they had assumed that I was a woman hitting on them, something that apparently they had experienced often. I did have a number of self-identified queer women agree to interviews while I listed myself as bisexual and I was able to get one transwoman to agree to participate in my study during this time. However, due to noticing that women seemed concerned about who I was and what I wanted from them, I wondered if it had to do with my sexual orientation. About halfway through my year of interview recruitment, I changed my profile to list my orientation as a "straight." I still interviewed some women who did not identify as exclusively heterosexual during

this time but could not get any additional transwomen to agree to participate. It remains unclear if this had to do with me (and my orientation) or if this had to do with the fact that I was not compensating women for their participation, as several women asked if the interviews would be paid, only to disappear from communication when I confirmed that they would not.

Following the guidance of Charmaz (2006), my first few interviews were used to determine some of my theoretical frame(s) and categories, as well as additional questions I should ask. My post-interview field notes were the space where I worked through these initial interviews and the themes that seemed most pressing. For instance, my respondents gave me direction in how to ask direct questions about sexual activities. Also, it became clear after several interviews that the notion of "post-racial" would not come up in the exchange without me asking about it directly. These two adjustments pushed back on some of the assumptions I made about what my respondents would divulge, as well as how significant those topics were to the eventual direction of my project. I utilized ATLAS.ti software to facilitate open and in vivo coding of my interview transcripts, and to collate my various forms of data (between interview and content analysis data). I used my post-interview field notes to contextualize my interactions, particularly to keep track of my emotions during the interviews and any striking or notable occurrences that happened before or after my digital recorder was turned on. In particular, these notes included important details about my respondents' appearances and how I viewed them, making note of how my own perceptions could shift over the course of an interview.

User Observation/Platform Elicitation

As part of the in-depth interviews I conducted, I asked the women I spoke with to pull up their *OkCupid* accounts on their phone applications so that I could observe how they navigated various aspects of the platform. As some scholars of digital media note, there is a need to better understand the ways in which new technologies impact the lives of the people who use them, especially the younger generations that are referred to interchangeably as "digital natives" or "millenials" (Helsper and Eynon 2010). Studies that attempt to gauge so-called "advanced" interaction with the Internet rely on surveys to assess what skills have been acquired (see Thompson 2013). Contrary to these approaches, I asked women to demonstrate what they did when they first opened the *OkCupid* app, showing me how they either first went to check for new messages in their inbox or would go to their "Visitors" tab where they could view which users had recently visited their profile. After women explained to me their reasoning behind these practices, I had them show me which filters they preferred to use when they did perform searches for other users. Then, together, we would look over search results. I asked questions about why certain people were attractive to these women and why other people were considered unattractive based on what first grabbed their attention in the thumbnail images in the search results; we then would click on profiles of these users and go through various aspects of their profiles that were of importance to the women I interviewed, such as photos, essays, and questions that were answered to determine match percentages within the website algorithm. This series of questions and actions, what I term *user observation/platform elicitation method*, was modeled off of photo

elicitation interview methods, wherein researchers introduce photographs into the interview context in order to expand on questions and provide a way for participants to communicate dimensions of their lives to researchers (Clark-IbáÑez 2004). It was my goal to be able to observe women actively using *OkCupid* rather than just asking them to abstractly explain what they tended to do and to also get a sense of what parts of the platform were the most important to the women I interviewed. Seeing women express excitement over a potential match's essays or photographs, as well as seeing comparisons made between various profiles, gave me a better sense of what the process of vetting users online looked like. I also was able to see these women navigate *OkCupid* in "real" time, as many times the women would log on and would receive new messages in their inbox while I was observing. Further, I was able to ask a variety of additional questions as women went through matches and profiles with me, further elaborating on topics they had mentioned at earlier parts of the interview.

Recruitment and Participant Characteristics

As previously noted, all in-depth interviews for this project took place in-person, between June 2015 and June 2016. The 30 women I interviewed for this study (see table of respondent characteristics in the Appendix) resided in one of the three cities focused on for this study at the time of the interview. All women I contacted had active *OkCupid* accounts at the time we initiated our relationship, though many women deleted or suspended their accounts shortly thereafter due to a desire to "get off" the website or because they had recently met someone they felt had potential for a romantic relationship.

Though I narrowed my search based on women who selected either more than one racial/ethnic category or the category of "Other" on *OkCupid*, I also made sure to state explicitly in my initial contact (see script in the Appendix) that I was interested in the online dating experiences of multiracial women. For some women, if they did not feel that they truly "qualified" as mixed-race, I would exchange several messages to clarify how they did identify and to confirm if they would still be interested in talking about their experiences on *OkCupid* considering that they had chosen identifiers that could communicate a different message about their racial/ethnic identity than how they may identify in person. For example, when I messaged Aidah, a 27-year-old woman whose profile identified her as "Other", she never indicated that she was not necessarily "mixed-race" in a U.S. conception of the term.

Based on other research, as well as U.S. Census Bureau data, I knew it was important to include those who chose the category of "Other" in my analysis due to many multiracial and multiethnic people identifying as "some other race." I only found out during my interview with Aidah that she identified as Bangladeshi, with grandparents on each side of her family from Pakistan and Iran, respectively. So, while she seemed to have a sense of herself as "mixed" in terms of nationalities and varied ethnicities via her Arab and South Asian backgrounds, I also recognize that compared to some of my other respondents, her identity differs in a meaningful way. To this end, Aidah was not necessarily an anomaly among my respondents even though overwhelmingly, my respondents identified both on- and off-line as either mixed-race or mixed-ethnicity. The fact that I ended up interviewing a few women who had incorporated "Other" into their

online identifications only to have them identify more monoracially in-person made it useful to think about how an online perception as either mixed-race or as a fetishized racial other might be beneficial in the dating world. Further, in asking the women I interviewed to self-identify their racial identity, I provided them with the opportunity incorporate nationality, race, and ethnicity in their conceptions of race. Therefore, throughout this text, I utilize the language that women used to identify themselves, recognizing that this requires me to blur sociological distinctions between these identities.

In several instances, multiple women who had chosen "White" and "Native American" as their identifiers on *OkCupid* responded to my recruitment messages to tell me that they were "really just white." One user responded:

> As a feminist, I gotta say this is a great topic and I'd be interested in seeing what you come up with, but as a cis-gendered white female, I'm not sure my insights would be of much use.
>
> I agree with you that multiracial and multiethnic women have unique experiences, not only in online dating but in their day-to-day life and as your general white girl, I think my perceptions/perspectives/experiences would take away from that. I don't want to white was feminism any more than Hollywood and politics already does.
>
> This sounds really great thought and I'm happy someone is bringing some light to the issues!

The user suggests that in participating in my study, she would be "whitewashing" feminism or taking away space from a "real" multiracial woman who had a unique experience to share. After some reflection, I responded to her message, hoping to gain some further clarity on why she might have chosen to identify herself as White and Native on her dating profile:

> I've been thinking further about your message and wanted to follow up. A clarification on my project: I'm looking at women who identify with more than one racial category on OKC, recognizing that in their everyday lives they may not identify that way or may not be perceived as being more than one race.
>
> I am quite curious about your experiences actually, given that your profile identifies you as Native American and white, yet, you seem to indicate that you are not perceived this way in your day-to-day life. Would you possibly be interested in speaking to that?

My desire to better understand her experiences and what differences might exist between her on- and off-line lives was seemingly convincing, as the user did respond with more details. However, after explaining to me that her new identification was a result of some ancestry testing related to her great-great-grandmother, I was unable to get this user to commit to meeting me for an interview:

> Honestly the native American is something we recently found out about through cheek swab that I think is really cool but my great great grandmother actually tore up her native American ID card because of the negative stigma associated with it. I've really been raised just like any other upper middle class Anglo Saxon female

Interestingly, this user saw herself as having an upbringing like "any other" upper middle class white woman and yet, she felt the impetus to change her *OkCupid* profile to reflect this recently obtained information. Another user I attempted to recruit responded similarly, expressing an interest in the project but an unwillingness to participate:

> This sounds really interesting. I'm excited for you and what you discover. I probably would not be able to help out as alas I'm really straight up Caucasian. I have been online dating for a number of years and have a female perspective but not multicultural. :(

I was unable to get this woman to meet with me for an interview either, even after I expressed an interest in finding out more about her experiences as someone who identified on her *OkCupid* profile as something other than white alone. I found this

occurrence to be particularly interesting due to a 2015 report from the Pew Research Center that suggested that white and Native American people are the largest population of multiracial people in the United States. It remains an important question to consider the implications of basing studies of mixed-race people on those who have two monoracial parents of different races or ethnicities and those who have various family members who may have racially identified differently. It is this latter conception that the Pew study and these women relied on, as they would lay claim to Native ancestry while also admitting that their life experiences were those of an "everyday white girl." Though the exchanges I share here happened with several other women who identified as white and Native, I was able to get several other women who identified in similar ways to agree to meet for interviews.

The complexity of mixed-race identity mentioned above illustrates how challenging it can be to study multiracial populations. Complications only increase due to the fact that shifts in understandings and experiences of race and ethnicity are articulated differently across various generations of families, making the measurement of racial "mixture" quite extensive. Although I identify specific patterns among my respondents throughout this text (for example, when analyzing the experiences and sentiments of women who were dating or had previously dated white men), I do not focus on my analysis on any particular group of mixed-race women in recognition of the aforementioned complexities.

Representativeness of Participants

Overall, I find the women I interview to be a varied representation of the complexity of multiracial and multiethnic identity in the United States. With the inclusion of respondents who identified with multiracial or multiethnic identity through both what G. Reginald Daniel (2001) terms a "first-generation" understanding – where an individuals parents identify as two distinct racial or ethnic groups – and a "generationally mixed" understanding – where racial and ethnic mixing occurs over several generations – this project addresses several avenues to self-identified mixedness. Further, the fact that I interviewed women who were both born in the U.S. and born and partially raised outside of the U.S. introduces an international influence on the ways that my respondents talk about race, family, and belonging. The diversity of women I spoke to was particularly impactful in terms of trying to gauge my respondents' class status, as 22 out of 30 respondents either had attained or were in the middle of pursuing a Bachelor's or Master's degree. These women varied in their professions, from being students to working in retail, to more established careers as school district data consultants or clinical therapists. While some women talked about nearly every other person in their family having post-high school educations, a significant number – eight out of 30 – came from families with military backgrounds and still others from more working-class origins. I believe that the skewing of my population towards women with higher education has to do first with the reputation of the platform *OkCupid* as a website with more "educated" singles, as well as the fact that the average *OkCupid* user is in their mid-twenties. Further, the fact that having a profile on the platform is free and easily accessible via a

smartphone application increases the site's appeal with younger demographics. I imagine that the increased attention in mass media to *OkCupid* due to the publication of various articles and books also helped with the platform's popularity among younger, educated people. In every interview, women told me they had heard about *OkCupid* from a friend, or someone else in their social circle who had either used *OkCupid* themselves or knew about someone else who had met someone off the site. Few women were able to recall an advertisement for the platform, unlike other major dating sites like *Match*, *eHarmony* or even *Zoosk* and *Christian Mingle*. So, with the site's appeal spreading through word of mouth, it would make sense that those who had spent time on college campuses would have heard of it; this was a similar occurrence when women discussed the dating platform, *Tinder*.

Reflexivity/Positionality

As described above, through my data collection process I became a "participant-experiencer" (Garcia et al. 2009), experiencing the website in a similar fashion to the users whose experiences I wish to understand. I was able to empathize and connect with my participants' experiences due to the fact that I, too, am a mixed-race woman who uses *OkCupid* and other online dating platforms to meet people in Texas. For the women who were part black and/or more dark-skinned in appearance, we tended to bond over having had to deal with issues around race while on dates. As Annette N. Markahm (2008) notes, for researchers studying life on-line, "understanding other-in-context is complicated by the blatant interference of the researcher into the frame of the field and the power of the

researcher in representing the culture" (p. 250). Because this project is certainly not autoethnographic – a feminist method that seeks to describe and "systematically analyze personal experience" (Ellis et al. 2011) – I strove to limit projection of my own experiences and interpretations upon my participants. This was especially important in terms of thinking about how significant a role that racism plays in dating interactions; going into this project, I expected that other mixed-race women would have experienced being deliberately racially stereotyped or insulted by potential dating partners.

For most of the women I spoke with, the notion that someone would say something along the lines of "you are so articulate for a black person" on a date was unthinkable (this is something I have personally experienced). I relied upon Markham (2008) as a guide for defining boundaries, determining what constitutes data, interpreting the other as text, using embodied sensibilities to interpret texuality, and representing the other ethically in my research reports, particularly as I worked through my own emotional responses to my interviews in my post-interview field notes. This exercise was especially important for interviews that I found personally triggering or with people who I seemed to clash with in terms of personality and/or personal politics. I also had to use these spaces to work through the ways in which several of my participants would comment on my skin color, or how they would mention how pretty my hair was and how they wished they had hair like mine. One woman stated that she really liked my "mocha skin", a comment that certainly made me feel awkwardly, as I had just interviewed a woman who had expressed her irritation that the man she was dating referred to her as a "mocha princess." In another interview, I felt that the woman I was speaking with was

staring at me every time I picked at my hair, which then led to me touching my hair more out of anxiety. At the end of our interview, she admitted that she was jealous of my hair and that she had been staring at me during our conversation. In moments like these, I had to work to contextualize my own feelings and interpretations of these women's actions. I had to remind myself that rather than these women "fetishizing" me, they were likely reproducing behaviors and ways of thinking that they had experienced or been exposed to. In a few cases, some women were quite affectionate at the end of our interviews, wanting to hug me, kiss me on the cheek, or take pictures with me. As Gloria González-López (2005) notes, when women share their lives with other women, a shared gender intimacy can develop and be expressed through physical affection. In one instance, a respondent who had indicated that she was looking for a woman to date (in addition to her boyfriend) wanted to take a photo with me to send to her boyfriend since he was curious about what I looked like and knew we were meeting for the interview that day. My appearance was often a way for women to contextualize the stories they told me about their own experiences. For light- and white-skinned respondents, I was rendered an entity for them to gesture towards when discussing black people or blackness.

In light of all that I experienced in these interactions, I believe that my "insider" status and knowledge allowed my participants to feel comfortable disclosing personal information to me. The fact that several women disclosed instances of sexual assault and racialized sexual interactions is illustrative of the level of comfort these women felt with me that I cannot say would have been afforded me if I had a different embodiment. These disclosures make it even more important that this project has approval from The

University of Texas Institutional Review Board (IRB). While Jody Miller and Barry Glassner (1997) note that interviewees respond to us based on who we are and that social distance(s) in particular may cause them not to trust us or purposely mislead us (p. 101), I believe that sharing some characteristics with my participants aided in developing the trust that I needed to avoid some of the "fissures" that occur during interviews. As Miller and Glassner further note, when we lack membership in their primary groups, we may not know enough to ask the right questions.

Further, the fact that I interviewed a number of women who held (or were in the pursuit of) at least one post-secondary degree definitely impacted the ways in which these women identified with me. Rachel Davis and colleagues (2013) note that for black respondents, having a black interviewer is important for studies that focus on racial and ethnic identity; this preference is even stronger among respondents who have a college education. So, while I am in the interesting position of "matching" my respondents by being multiracial (as well as identifying as a woman), I also differ from many of my respondents because we do not share physical appearances or racial identities. As I have stated, having some commonality with my respondents placed me in a position to establish rapport; several of my respondents expressed excitement at the opportunity to talk about race and dating with another multiracial person. Yet, this shared identity as multiracial does not effectively account for the ways that my respondents likely would have responded differently to the questions asked of them had I possessed a different racial background or different phenotypic features. This would certainly have impacted the ways that women gestured toward me to illustrate skin-color differences as they told

me stories and would have changed the ways that women talked about my appearance in comparison to theirs (such as my hair texture). Though I can certainly see how interviewer-interviewee race and gender "matching" benefitted me in conducting this study, I also recognize that there are possibly compelling differences that could have emerged in my data had I appeared differently or if another interviewer was included.

Ethical Issues and Considerations

In recognition of the obligation I have as a researcher not to do harm to my participants, I have worked to engage in a research program that does not violate the approval issued from the University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Board. This means that I maintain confidentiality throughout the dissertation through the use of s=pseudonyms. All names mentioned here and in my field notes are names created to protect these women and the identities of anyone they mentioned. Most importantly, I provided all respondents with an extensive informed consent document (see Appendix) where they could indicate their willingness to participate in the interview, to have the interview audio-recorded, and to show me their online dating profiles as part of the interview. Further, once I determined that ending the audio-recordings before starting the post-interview conversation with respondents would result in the loss of significant and important data, I always asked for verbal consent from my participants to continue recording our conversation. For those who did not wish to have any additional conversation afterwards "on record", I spoke to them without the audio-recording device. Further, I maintained all documentation that could identify my respondents wholly

separate from all interview data, which was transcribed and anonymized with new pseudonyms. I also deleted all message history on the *OkCupid* account I created for interview recruitment, before deactivating the account. Pseudonyms and ID numbers were used in my post-interview field notes as well in order to maintain consistency between what observations I made in my field notes with my interview transcripts. Profiles that were collected for content analysis were also given ID numbers and all record of which respondents I contacted for interviews was disposed of following completion of data analysis. All of this data has been maintained on an encrypted hard drive rather than on my personal laptop.

For those that might question the veracity of what my respondents shared with me in their interviews, I point to the fact that my respondents pulled up photos, text messages, Facebook messages and profiles, in addition to a number of other dating apps, on their phones while in the midst of the interview in order to provide me with evidence of the things that they were experiencing or to provide me with a visual "face" on which to attach the story they were sharing. Further, knowing that my gender identity, as well as the identities of my respondents, makes a difference in the dynamics of these interviews (Denzin 1989) made me extra vigilant regarding the ways in which I behaved during these interactions. Rather than posturing as an authority – a paradigm that Ann Oakley (1981) describes as part of the inherently masculine structure of traditional interviews – I aimed to make my respondents feel comfortable. The fact that nearly every woman chose to meet me in a public place where they already tend to meet potential dates from online dating websites provided them with a sense of safety, while also creating a casual

dynamic that enabled a flow of conversation. Additionally, as I stated earlier in this chapter, the fact that I provided women with an opportunity to question me provided "intimacy" through reciprocity (see Oakley 1981, p. 49). These considerations are some of the ways in which I attempt to manage the difficulty of documenting the messiness of social life. In accounting for the ways in which my intrusion into the privacy of these women's lives can be viewed as a violation, I hope that my efforts to make ethical choices improved my ability to glean important information about the quality of these women's experiences. Though sociologists can ever get the complexity of social life completely "right," I certainly did my best to reflect these women's lives as they were presented to me.

In the next chapter, I begin the analysis of my empirical findings starting with an assessment of how the women I interviewed ended up using online dating websites to facilitate their dating lives and how these women strategically plan out the content of their *OkCupid* profiles. The subsequent empirical chapters will explore the vetting strategies these women use to determine compatibility and the frames employed to draw racial boundaries within committed relationships.

CHAPTER 3

DIGITIZING MIXED-RACE: NAVIGATING *OKCUPID* AND CRAFTING A DATING IDENTITY

Introduction

A quick Google search with the words "online dating profile advice" will yield a plethora of lists and guides from various outlets – including digital newspaper *The Huffington Post*, fashion magazine, *Marie Claire*, and finance magazine, *Business Insider* – extolling the virtues of smiling photos, quirky screen names, and "turning negatives into positives." These advice columns speak to the primacy of fostering attraction when engaging in online dating, relying on the principle of self-presentation – the effort spent to shape others' impressions of oneself via cues, appearance, and behavior (Goffman 1959). Social psychologists Kelsey Chappetta and Joan Barth (2016) argue that perceived physical attractiveness and adherence to gender role norms are central to generating (heterosexual) romantic interest. In particular, Chappetta and Barth suggest that gender role incongruence is the most significant factor after photographs in whether an online dating profile is deemed attractive or not (pp. 743-744). Based on the expertise of one online dating profile "consultant", Lisa Hoehn, photos are the main area in which to control how a profile is viewed (Stone 2014). According to Hoehn, photos should be matched to a person's interests and if users really want to increase their chances online, they should change their profile pictures every few weeks, in case someone "skipped over" them before. Further, media studies scholar Andra Siibak (2009) finds that among the youngest users of social media (11- to 18-year-olds) girls place more value on the

aesthetic and emotional aspects of photographs when creating their "visual self." Across these articles focused on advice and empirical studies like that of Siibak and Chappetta and Barth, gender plays a huge role in what kinds of photos and other details can be included as part of the profile narrative. In this chapter, I illustrate the varied ways in which the women I interviewed ended up online dating in the first place, tracing their process of joining the dating platform, *OkCupid*, in particular. Then, I reveal the contours of the decisions that go into crafting a dating profile, namely the selection of photographs based on what I term *the appeal formula*. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the impact that profile creation has on the dating experience and how the efforts that women put into developing their dating profiles influences how they view the profiles of prospective romantic partners.

Finding One's Way to the "Best Free Dating Site on Earth"

> One of my best friends has met his partner through that [*OkCupid*] and he was like "Yeah, it's a good place to start." I was like, okay. Two of my friends – like one, one of my friends, my friend's sister, she met her husband on there. So, and then my friend met his partner. They were like, "Yeah, give it a whirl!" and I was like – and somebody told me, "You're not putting yourself out there, that's why you're not getting dates." And I was like, "Okay, if this is a way of putting myself out there I'll put myself out there."

Sitting with Aidah, fighting off grackles outside of a bakery in central Austin and listening to her stories about "someone who knew someone" that had met online, I considered the similarities among the women I interviewed in terms of how they ended up on *OkCupid*. Aidah's dark, blackish-brown hair hung to her waist, with her kohl-lined brown eyes and black plastic frame eyeglasses emphasizing the roundness of her face.

Like several of the women I interviewed, she – a freelance photographer who identifies as a multiethnic Bangladeshi – looked somewhat different from her *OkCupid* page, though she more closely resembled her profile pictures when she smiled, which lit up her face, especially when she laughed. Aidah, quoted at the beginning of this section, started creating online dating accounts because she hoped they would lead to her being able to meet more people. She noted that she very rarely met people outside of her social circle or at work, so online dating was an easy way to find new people, particularly those who met her rather rigorous criteria in terms of level of education and articulateness. With her desire to go on successful dates, she was willing to take advice from those who told her that she needed to "put herself out there", as she knew friends (and even friends' sisters) who had met boyfriends, girlfriends, and spouses via online dating. For Aidah, online dating is also a means of rebelling against the constraints of her family, who she framed as more traditional Muslims than she is. Because her family and cultural upbringing would frown upon her dating people casually, she has generally kept her limited dating experiences a secret, only confiding the complete truth in one of her younger aunts.

Corinne, a 31-year-old freelance photographer who identifies as Korean and white, discussed the pressure she felt from her mother to date and meet someone to marry now that she was in her thirties. Raven-haired and very pale-skinned, with bright hazel eyes rimmed by quirky black, cat-eye frame glasses, I was unsurprised that many people mistook Corinne for "just" white or more "exotic" ethnicities such as Mexican or Russian. That her mother expressed a desire for her to only consider white men for marriage was a consistent theme throughout our conversation; based on the men she

described having relationships with and who she showed me on her *OkCupid* account, this seemingly has influenced her dating practices, both on- and off-line. Corinne noted that the white man she was currently dating – whom she had met off of *OkCupid* – was not exactly her type. However, she gave me specific reasons for seeing him despite this:

> He's really nice, I just have – aesthetically he's not my type. I just gave him a chance because he was a nice guy. Nice is cool, but we don't have a lot of common. I'm finding that out. I was like, "Oh, he's a geek like me" and like that's cool. "Yeah, Star Trek" and blah blah blah. But like he, uh – there's like little things that bother me. He's very white-centric. He's a white guy and he's all "Yeah, America!" and this and that. He's like a world traveler – he just came back from Turkey – and I'm just like, really? I guess it's cool if you're like, proud of that. He's Jewish, too.

Based on this description and some other things she shared, Corinne did not seem very into the idea of dating this person long term. Not only had she planned a date with someone she had recently met on the dating website *Plenty of Fish* to follow our interview, but she had also been regularly chatting with white men overseas, namely the United Kingdom, Australia, and Norway. She shared that she signed up for online dating because a friend recommended it, as well as the fact that she was ready to end a six-year dating hiatus following a long-term relationship. She stated:

> She [her friend] was on *Match* and then she moved to *OkCupid*. She was like you should try it, it's free, you don't have to pay for anything unlike *Match*. And it's better than the other sites, like *Plenty of Fish*. And then *Tinder*, obviously, is just used for sex.
>
> I already overcame it [heartbreak from previous relationship] within a couple of years, and afterwards I was like "Eh, I just want to be independent for a while" and be by myself. And then I was just like, "Eh I'm fine. I'll jump back into the dating scene." Yeah, I think it's because I moved in my thirties and I'm older.

Corinne was not only motivated by her friend's use of online dating but also the fact that she had made some changes in her life and was interested in starting anew. When I asked her if there were any additional pressures due to the fact that she was now in her thirties, she explained:

> Slightly, especially from my mother. She's like you need to have babies, you need to go find a man. You need to do this. And I'm just kind of like "Ummm… whatever." It just would be nice to be in a relationship. I have a lot of mommy issues. [laughs]

Like many of the other older women I interviewed, pressure from families to settle down hung over the dating experience. While some women were able to avoid the expectation of children because they had siblings, others were like Corinne who is an only child. Despite the fact that Corinne framed her mother as a person who is ultra conservative and herself as the complete opposite, any time she has dated someone seriously or even started to date someone, when she mentions them to her mother things would not always go so well. Disturbingly, Corinne has to navigate her mother's extremely racist perspectives on certain men, with her mother claiming that Corinne should not date Hispanic men because "they're dirty" or that she should not date the half-white, half-Thai person she was dating because Thai people will "sell you into slavery." As Corinne states, she has "mommy issues"; no matter how much she and her mother disagree, if she likes someone enough she would want them to meet her mother.

However, not all women's introduction to online dating came through *OkCupid*. Gia, a 22-year-old college student who described herself as Hispanic and Middle Eastern, had a lot of enthusiasm when it came to discussing dating and what she termed the

"touchy subjects" of intimacy, race and ethnicity, and diversity. At just over six feet tall, she made me feel quite short; I watched her nearly waist-length brown wavy hair float in the wind that blew between the buildings as we sat outside in a central common area of her campus and bonded over our mutual love of animals before getting deep into the throes of the interview. Like most of the other fair-skinned women I interviewed, I was unsurprised that Gia described being perceived as white by others, even as she noted that her race *was* white and that her ethnicity was Hispanic. To this end, Gia noted that her identification with her Lebanese ancestry came later, in college, after doing research; she framed her identity growing up as Hispanic due to how she was raised. Despite the acknowledgement of her whiteness, Gia made a point to distinguish between herself and what she termed Anglo whites, particularly the "really big, tall white guys" she preferred to date (typically over six feet tall, with heavier, "burly" builds, and of course, lush beards). Gia described a fairly broad experience with online dating platforms:

> We'll, I've personally used *Tinder* before and that's the one I've used the most for I guess that past year or so? Year and a half. Yeah, and then I used a few others a little bit, like *Hinge* and then I met a guy that I dated for a while on there. I didn't really like it so I used it and then I like applied – well, I signed up for this one called *Coffee Meets Bagel* – I use it a little bit but I personally didn't like it. It was just too, I don't know, it was just something about it that I didn't really like. It wasn't very flowy, you know? It was just too much to go through.
>
> So yeah, and my best friend, he uses *OkCupid* and he showed me it – his website or his profile – and I really liked the way it looked, and like the questions it asked, so. And I was in a relationship at the time so, I was like "Well, this doesn't really matter to me, so whatever." But then when we broke up, um I downloaded the app and I really like it, so, yeah. I've been using that for the past few months.

Though she still primarily met people off of *Tinder* – estimating that she had met as many as 20 people from that platform – Gia viewed *OkCupid* as more for entertainment,

enjoying the fact that she could browse and look at lots of different people's profiles. She noted that because *Tinder* relies so heavily on the physical aspects, she liked being able to see more of a person's personality on *OkCupid*, especially being able to tell what kind of intellectual discussion that person might be capable of. This binary between *Tinder* and *OkCupid* was a consistent narrative throughout my interviews, with women choosing one or the other based on past dating experiences. For instance, Leilani, a 28-year-old who identifies as black and Korean, described online dating as emotionally challenging. She explained:

> It's so mixed. It's like bittersweet. You have like good parts, bad parts. I think the good is that like you, you're making connections, you're meeting people. You're getting the dating experience; you're even going so far as to like, explore the city. I think that was like a big part of online dating for me 'cause I moved to Austin about two and half years ago and I only knew a couple of people here. And I was just like, well, let me kind of go out there and see what's in Austin and sort of find new places to go. So, that is like a really good part of it, too.
>
> I think the bad is just that whole like hook up element? Being in the – sorry – being in the generation of like hook ups and *Tinder* and all that stuff, it was very daunting whenever it came to like actually getting an *OkCupid* profile and – I mean, I've had one for like, ever, but it's just been dusted, you know, like I had one a long, long time ago and I kind of just had it, you know, off-and-on for maybe about a year or two, and then finally when I moved to Austin I was just like, "Well, let me try to see who's out there." But that whole like hooking up thing was definitely one part of it that was – I was just like not interested.

Hearing from Leilani that she found online dating to be daunting was surprising, as she is tall, slim, and stylish, and one of the most conventionally attractive women I interviewed. With her tan skin, long dark brown hair, high cheekbones, and full lips, she embodied much of the so-called "biracial beauty stereotype" (Sims 2012). Yet, her concerns here echo those of the other women I interviewed. The specter of online dating as a signal of

"desperation" hung over all of my interviews, even as it was simultaneously viewed as the logical thing for young single people to do. "Putting yourself out there" was a constant refrain. As evidenced here, the majority of women end up using online dating platforms due to the recommendation of someone close to them; the recommendations hold even more weight if someone has met someone to date seriously or to marry from the website. Further, women appear most motivated to join after major milestones have occurred, such as breaking up with a long-term partner or moving to a new city. Though online dating was consistently normalized, certain websites or applications had better reputations than others.

Crafting the Dating Profile and Navigating Online Dynamics

OkCupid was the preferred dating platform for nearly all of the women I interviewed, with most women only briefly using other dating applications in tandem with *OkCupid*. For the few women who had moved on to preferring other platforms, they chose other free platforms that catered to a specific demographic they were looking for or that generally increased their odds of meeting other people (such as platforms were perceived to have more people of color or that explicitly provided a space for queer women). The latter instance was a major motivator in signing up for the rapid-matching smartphone dating application, *Tinder*, which 18 women brought up during the interviews. *Tinder* was described as a "hook up app"; as Corinne succinctly stated, men who only wanted to have sex should "…go on *Tinder*, don't go on *OkCupid* where people are actually on there to date." Few empirical studies have investigated the motivations

behind signing up for *Tinder*, but communications scholars Sindy Sumter and colleagues (2017) state that love is a stronger motivator than casual sex, especially for women users (p. 73-74). In fact, despite this reputation around casual sex, a number of women – eight out of 30 – discussed meeting multiple people that they had dated seriously and/or had genuinely liked from the platform. Other dating applications named by my participants – mostly sites that are designed to cater to both heterosexual and gay or lesbian users – included the more widely used *Plenty of Fish*, *Match*, *Bumble*, *Hinge*, *Badoo*, *Zoosk*, or *eHarmony*, and the less-used *Coffee Meets Bagel, Date Hookup*, *Meet Me*, *Skout, HER* – a site for lesbians, bisexuals, and other queer people – *FetLife* – a fetish-driven site – *Hipster Shaadi*/*Ishqr* – a site for Muslim singles – or *TransgenderDate* – a platform used by the sole transwoman I interviewed. Nearly all of these dating platforms are free to use, with some, like *Zoosk*, *Match*, and *eHarmony* requiring pricey subscriptions (US$29.95/month, US$42/month, and US$60/month, respectively) to get full use of the site. Others that have begun to employ subscription-based additions to existing free platforms typically charge small monthly fees to gain access to things like the ability to browse invisibly (US$9.95/month for "A-list" on *OkCupid*) or the ability to extend a match's expiration (US$9.99/month for "Bumble Boost" on *Bumble*).

OkCupid was described by my participants as having the most appeal due to the encompassing nature of the profiles. By including space for a variety of different essays, an ever expanding set of "Match Questions" that drive the platform's "Match" algorithm, and the ability to link to other social media accounts like the photo-cache *Instagram*, *OkCupid* was framed as a happy medium between more frivolous platforms like *Tinder*

and more serious ones like *Match* and *eHarmony*. Further, *OkCupid*'s inclusion of a "Quick Match" section that resembles the swiping aspects of platforms like *Tinder*, *Bumble*, *Hinge*, and *Badoo* provides an ideal mixture of ways to meet new people quickly, with little effort required. However, as Aidah notes, *OkCupid* is preferable to other websites:

> I like that it [*OkCupid*] makes you actually read somebody's profile. You can tell they really want to get to know you. There are some men you can tell that they're just liking everybody [on *Hipster Shaadi*] because they want to see pictures. They'll be like "Hey!" and then they'll see my pictures and they're like "Never mind." …they just stop responding.

On *Hipster Shaadi*, users cannot see photos until the users have mutually liked each other's written profiles and sent messages to one another, an arrangement that opposes *Tinder*'s more superficial selection method wherein users often will "swipe right" on everyone in order to increase matches so that they can begin to message. *Tinder* has developed a reputation where heterosexual men tend to bombard women matches with unrequested "dick pics" (McKeon 2015) – typically close up or awkwardly staged photos of penises – or expectations for sex, leading to a general distaste for the platform among many online daters despite its widespread popularity. In fact, in response to the sexual harassment she experienced in the workplace, *Tinder* co-founder Whitney Wolfe went on to found the "feminist *Tinder*" platform, *Bumble*, where only women users can initiate the conversation in the hopes of preventing the violent or misogynist outbursts that have characterized *Tinder* (and even *OkCupid*) heterosexual exchanges (Yashari 2015). It is amongst these threats that many women choose *OkCupid* for online dating because there is more information to go off of in the profile. Though *OkCupid* allows users to see

profile pictures upfront, the addition of essays and Match Question results allow for greater personalization of one's profile and increased vetting power. In the early 2000s, *OkCupid* even offered games and chat room forums for users; these aspects have since fallen out of use, though as some of my participants mentioned, websites like *Reddit* – an aggregation and discussion forum website driven by member-submitted content – have entire sections (termed "sub-reddits") dedicated to *OkCupid* and dating advice. A quick skim of these discussions threads will bring up topics such as how low of a match percentage is too low to date or how can men ask for full body photos of women without offending them. Overall, women seem to feel like Allyson, who framed *OkCupid*'s appeal as follows:

> It was a like cool, easier version, young, hipper version of like *eHarmony* or *Match*. Established people looking for relationships. This felt a little less conservative than those.

On average, the women I interviewed had maintained accounts on *OkCupid* for two years and nine months, with some women having accounts for as short as only two months and others for as long as 10 years. Many of the women mentioned having their accounts active off and on over these time periods, consistently (temporarily) deactivating once they met someone with potential or when they had become irritated with people on the platform. As Aidah noted, she deleted the *OkCupid* app phone off of her phone once before:

> I just deleted it because maybe... I'm not sure, maybe I got like a crass message on there? That's usually my M.O. [modus operandi] if I get a crass message or anything like that I just take it off. Yeah, some guy I talked to – 'cause I was on there at like three in the morning; you know I wasn't looking to get anything, I was really, like I couldn't fall asleep. So, I was like, "Okay I guess I'll just, you

> know, browse, peruse" and he's like "I guess we're online at the same time, do you wanna like 'you know'" and I'm just like "Um what? Nooo."

The "you know" that Aidah references here is an invitation to engage in some form of sexual act, though she never specified exactly what it was that the person suggested. Many women described getting messages that were "forward," asking to meet up for sex or to "sext" – the sending and sharing sexual photos online, or via other digital technology (Ybarra and Mitchell 2014) – via *OkCupid*'s messaging system or via text message. While this kind of behavior is especially common on platforms like *Tinder*, *OkCupid* is not exempt. The social media account Bye Felipe uses screenshots of men's aggressive responses to women who reject them online to demonstrate the sexism and male entitlement that can occur (McKeon 2015). However, India, a 24-year old marketing manager for a retail chain, stated that these messages may appear randomly:

> Well I got one really aggressive message from this black guy in particular. He messaged me at like four in the morning, I was asleep, and he was like "Hey, you're really cute. Hey, I like your hair." And then, "Fine, fuck you! Just keep dating white guys!" And I was just like, "But it's four AM though?" And I was like "Huh?" That was one of the most, kind of like aggressive messages I've ever received 'cause I was like "Damn! Where'd all that come from?" Just, unnecessary vitriol for something that's so unfounded.

What India describes here is the kind of male entitlement that can manifest in online messages due to not getting the response that a man wants or a man not getting a response at all. Even though India was asleep and this message was sent in the middle of the night, the male user seemed to expect that she would respond immediately. Further, the fact that he assumes that her rejection lies in a preference for dating white men suggests that some men of color believe they are being rejected in favor of whiteness.

Also, it remains unclear whether the fact that India is multiracial – she identifies as black and Asian – might be influencing this man's angry response. Compared to other messages India described receiving – where men would call her "exotic" and gush about how they imagined her mother being Asian – this message seemed low on her list of concerns (she stated that the Asian mom fetish was much creepier). Leilani had similar concerns over the bravery of men behind the safety of a digital screen. She noted:

> I think especially with online dating, specifically, 'cause you know once guys have that computer and that keyboard and they can just send, you know, whatever comment that they need to and there's no immediate repercussion of me either slapping them in the face or really railing into you verbally and saying like, "Hey, what you just said is really messed up and I'm calling you out on it and I'm gonna make you feel uncomfortable. I'm gonna… make you remember this situation so you don't make another black girl feel uncomfortable." I think for me that's like a huge part of it 'cause, you know, …because people can like really tell you whatever they wanna say. And there's no repercussion. Yeah you may block them, or you may curse them out or something but nothing else is gonna come of it. So, that part has been really tough. [laughs]

Though Leilani was inclined to stand up for herself (and other black women), she also seemed resigned to certain levels of harassment online. Overall, the women who seemed most upset by aggressive messages, particularly those with requests for sexual activity, were women who either were still virgins at the time of the interview or who had limited sexual experience. For women who were more sexually-experienced or expressed a greater comfort with sex, I found that these messages were an annoyance, but not as horrifying as they were for other women. However, even for women who are more sexually experienced, navigating how much of their sexual expertise to disclose upfront can be difficult, as men are viewed as having a tendency to reject women after sleeping

together on the first date. Corinne notes that while she does not think it is okay for men to stop talking to women, she also would prefer for men to be honest and straightforward:

> If you sleep with them the first time they tend to just kind of like, not talk to you again afterwards. …It's just, it's like I guess when they get what they want, that's it. And I'm like, I'm not okay with that. It's kind of like you've read my profile and I've already told you that. I might be a highly sexualized person but I'm really picky and I'm not quick to jump into it. Like I said, I was six years abstinent, so, you know. So, if I do let you in and I do sleep with you, then obviously I felt like there was some type of connection that had happened. And I'm just like "Okay, yeah, let's do this! I think you're attractive, I think you have a great personality."
>
> I'm not objective to sleeping together on the first date but if that's all you're looking for, then it's kind of like a slap in the face for me. And they'll do that to me. And it's kind of like, just tell me that you just want to fuck me. If you just want to fuck me, then just fuck me and we'll get it over with. If I think you're attractive and I wanna do it and you're clean – that's my main thing, you better be clean – then yeah, let's do it. It's not gonna be like, I'm not ready to jump into like a hardcore relationship in the beginning but if it develops into something more, then sure. But if you're just interested in it for that reason, just tell me that. You know, I – don't play these mind games where you try to get to know me as a person and you get past my like, solid brick wall barrier and then you just like, ignore me afterwards. Because, like, that's just not the type of person that I am. I just want to like, be honest, but a lot of them are not honest.

Corinne is one of several women I interviewed who was very open and vocal about her sex life, noting that it was important to her to be clear about what she did or did not want to do. Like many women, she described a wall or barrier that she would keep up until someone interested her enough to let it down. Many women go in to online dating with the expectation that men are only looking for sex or will otherwise be dishonest, so for the most part, the aggressiveness of male users has become fairly normalized as part of the chaff one has to sort through in order to find quality partners. Many women discuss just taking the crass or aggressive types of messages in stride, while others are deterred

and become more inclined to give up on online dating all together. But, as Corinne describes, many women have to come to terms with how they want to present themselves online and what kind of messages that their presentation might elicit in return, as well as what kind of expectations men might have for when they eventually meet up in person. Of the advice women gave me, many recommended not posting super sexual pictures and to be cognizant of people who were just looking to fetishize; consistently, I was told to "be honest" and to "spell out exactly what I want." However, even women who do not post sexy photos or indicate in any way that they are interested in sex in their profiles still have to deal with men who will ignore explicit warnings to not message if only interested in sex. Though a great deal goes into the process of crafting the dating profile, much of the changes that are made over time have to do with the experiences women amass as they navigate messages and first dates. To preempt some of these issues, however, the women I interviewed focused primarily on their photographs, rather than their written profiles, to communicate who they are and what they are looking for on *OkCupid*.

The Appeal Formula: Representing the Self in Digital Form

Allyson, a 27-year old filmmaker who identified as "hapa" (white and Filipino, specifically), was one of the few women who had only had an account with *OkCupid* for a just under a year off-and-on at the time of the interview. With her slightly tanned skin tone, dark, thick hair chopped into blunt bangs, and hazel-brown eyes rimmed by bright orange eyeglasses, Allyson read to me as pretty clearly East Asian. Contrary to my reading, however, she consistently described herself throughout our conversation as

"white-privileged" while also one of the darkest-skinned people in the very white, Midwestern-college towns she had grown up in. She noted that despite having gotten tired of "creepy messages" and dates that did not go anywhere, she decided to reactivate her *OkCupid* account about two months prior to our meeting because she had finished production on her film and had more free time to feel lonely due to not being around her cast and crew. As we sat outside enjoying a pair of crumbly scones, she shared a rather sad story about how she had fallen in love with her best friend from film school. Because he did not reciprocate her feelings, she joined *OkCupid* as part of her efforts to "get over" him, describing it as a means of becoming "interested in *anybody* else." When I asked Allyson what she found to be most important when creating her online profile, she focused on what she felt was a genuine representation of her personality and her physical appearance. Like many of the other larger-bodied women I interviewed – some of whom, like Allyson, were direct about identifying themselves as "fat." Allyson explained:

> Being honest, I have a hard time being genuinely myself. Relationships don't feel completely sustainable. So, I'm trying to represent myself honestly, even if there are parts of my personality or my life that I'm not jazzed about.
>
> Like I don't get a whole lot of sleep or exercise a lot or try to be healthy. I'm messy. I make sure I show what my body looks like, because it's kind of protecting myself being really honest about what my body looks like. I don't like being on a date with someone who is not interested. I'm a little self-conscious about my teeth, so a photo that shows my teeth, I'm less likely to put up. I'm self-conscious about my skin and about my - the shape of my face? Little things I worry about like the fat under my chin.
>
> There are pictures I won't put up because I feel like they highlight those things but if I can find a flattering picture that doesn't hide those things, those are what I'd like to post. Being vocal and honest about your body is like a way of honoring it. It's really easy to sanitize yourself in a way that you don't feel very good about yourself.

Like any other person who has an online dating profile, Allyson describes a significant pressure to position herself in the most flattering way, while also being honest. Christian Rudder, co-founder of *OkCupid*, notes in his blog that analyzes data from the website – called *OkTrends* – that people consistently exaggerate factors like their height and their finances in order to appear more attractive (Rudder 2010). For instance, because taller men are more likely to be read as attractive, Rudder estimates that male users are actually two percent shorter in reality than whatever height they list online. However, one of the most significant ways in which people try to manipulate their perceived attractiveness has to do with photographs; Rudder attests that "hotter" photos tend to be older and that older users – those over 30 years old – will be more likely to have dated photos that reflect them in a better light. The fact that a number of women expressed fear that I was potentially "catfishing" them – a term that refers primarily to the deceptive practice of posting photos that are either a) heavily altered through photoshopping or b) are stolen from another person or some stock image available on the Internet – there is a persistent fear that not only will other users not be who they say they are, but also that these women will not be perceived as honest. Here, Allyson begins to reveal the contours of what I refer to as *the appeal formula* for profile photos. The women I spoke with consistently came up with a variety of justifications for why they chose the photos that they chose, especially for those who did not opt to link their *Instagram* accounts to their profiles to provide access to additional images. Generally, the appeal formula consists of some combination of the following: selfies/self-portraits (both with and without visible

makeup); a full-body photo (to show what one's body looks like); a photo where the person is engaged in some kind of activity that suggests their personality; a photo with family or friends; a photo of a pet or some other beloved object. The photos are meant to highlight one's attractiveness but also one's seriousness about seeking a partner. As Gia notes, profile picture selection is an opportunity:

> It's just funny, like the whole thing of vanity and like how we see ourselves. Because I am – I mean I think to a certain extent we're all like vain and narcissistic. Vain as in "I want other people to see me, like this way, at my best." So, I pick pictures that, I think, if I was the other person that I'd be interested in.
>
> I know, both profiles – both *Tinder* and *OkCupid* – I have a picture of me and one of my animals from my job [at a primate sanctuary] which was really important to me because it's like "Oh cool!" I wanna like – I love Ace, the monkey I took care of and we got a really good picture. So, that and just pictures where I think I look good, where I have my makeup done well and I always pick one picture – at least one picture – with my body. I like people to know what I look like. That I'm not like this really skinny girl, I'm not way heavier than I am but this is how I look. I try to be realistic with pictures, I've heard things from my guy friends where they'll be like, "Oh, she's a master of angles." She knows how to make her angles look prettier than she actually is or thinner or whatever. So, I'm just like "Wow." [laughs] Guys pay attention to that.

Gia also told me that one of the most important things for her to put in the written part of her profile – even though a lot of people will not read that part - is her love for animals and how passionate she is about them. Having a photo with one of the animals from the primate sanctuary where she worked serves to support this written part of her profile and in her case, acts as a conversation starter. Of course, what is most interesting to me about Gia's comments here is her realization that men pay close attention to the kinds of pictures that women post and then talk about it off-line with their friends. The acknowledgement that a woman's photos will likely be scrutinized as heavily as she will

analyze others' strengthens the desire to use the appeal formula in the hopes of avoiding this off-line criticism.

Based on my content analysis of 225 *OkCupid* profiles (inclusive of a total of 1,345 photos) from active users residing in Austin, Houston, and San Antonio between April and July 2015, the average number of profile pictures is approximately six. These photos vary in quality, from screen captures and scans of print photos to cell phone camera pictures to higher quality images produced by digital cameras. *OkCupid* limits accounts to a maximum of 10 profile photos but the minimum number of photos is one. The vast majority of these photos fall within the category of "selfies", which I break up into two forms: a) photos of the face, neck and occasionally the top of the shoulders (36.5 percent of the photos analyzed) and b) photos of the face and upper body that might be cropped at the chest, the waist, or the hips (39 percent of the photos analyzed). The most significant difference between these forms of selfies is the ability of an observer to ascertain what the person's body might look like. Photos that crop at the chest or higher tend to be less conclusive, whereas photos that show the majority of the torso tend to be more telling of body type. It seems likely that many women consider partial body photos sufficient for "showing what their bodies look like" as opposed to full head-to-toe photos. In fact, on other social media platforms – such as *Twitter* – women and men who primarily or exclusively use profile pictures that crop at the shoulders are referred to as "Neck Up Twitter" and are often accused of hiding more overweight bodies through strategic angles or cropping of pictures (personal observation). Only just over 16 percent of the *OkCupid* profiles I analyzed included full body photos, with under two percent

posting only lower body photos where their faces were not included. These latter users tended to have very fit bodies and be clothed in items such as lingerie. Very few profiles tend to include anything but the pictures of the dater; the most common inclusions included photos of, or with, pets (just under two percent) and photos with other people (nearly nine percent). Around six percent of photos clearly demonstrated the dater engaged in some activity, such as attending a baseball game, traveling, exercising, horseback riding, or cosplaying – a type of performance art where fans of various kinds of television, film, or written media dress up as beloved characters, typically for comic or fantasy genre conventions or on holidays like Halloween.

While these findings correlate for the most part with the types of photos women described as needed for completing their own profiles, the heavy reliance on partial body photos suggests that many women are not necessarily comfortable with completely showing what their body looks like. Several women described being told they were more attractive in person by people they eventually met – implying that their photo choices do not do them justice – and there were several occasions where I was surprised by the appearance of the woman I was meeting as compared to her appearance in her profile pictures. Often, my inability to recognize women at first was due to the fact that their skin tones appeared lighter/brighter in their images on *OkCupid* or the fact that most of the time when they came to meet me, they were dressed very casually and not wearing much makeup, if any at all. The specific preferences that women expressed for their own photos is interesting considering that women were rather vehement about labeling men who posted too many selfies or shirtless photos of themselves in the gym on their profiles as

"douche-y" and unattractive – making claims such as, "Do you not have any friends who can take a picture of you?" When men post multiple selfies of themselves in their car or in the mirror, women interpreted this to mean that they did not care much about putting together a good profile. In contrast, among the profiles I analyzed, many women posted selfies taken in their cars, in their mirrors, and even multiple versions of themselves in the same outfit, sometimes with barely discernable new angles. Further, a number of women expressed annoyance at men who posted photos with other people, particularly when other women were in the photos. To this end, women generally seemed to avoid including photos with other people, since it was a small percentage of the images I analyzed, but for women who did include group photos these women tended to include more photos on average and often included pictures with other female friends or small children in addition to photos of themselves alone. So, in some ways, there is a slight disconnect between what women told me was important in representing themselves and what I observed in the analysis of profiles more broadly.

However, the fact that virtually every single photo I analyzed was in color demonstrates that women did want to provide a seemingly "accurate" representation of their appearance, at least in terms of their skin and hair color and other phenotypic markers. Recent research has noted that perceived skin color in online dating profile images impacts how observers racialized them, leading to implications for how a person's appeal as a potential date would be impacted (Feliciano 2016); the fact that some darker skinned women would post photos of themselves with a seemingly different skin tone in each picture speaks to the desire to avoid associations with perceived

blackness. These variations in appearance can depend on lighting, exposure, and the application of "filters" to images – an increasingly more common phenomenon with the expanded use of social media applications like *Snapchat* and *Instagram* where added filters can lighten appearance, make blemished skin appear more clear and even, and where parts of the face can be obscured with digital flower crowns, puppy dog ears or bunny rabbit noses. Even though photographs play one of the most significant roles in perception, the fact that users can select multiple racial and ethnic categories to describe themselves also can contribute to perceived race.

However, I posit that the shift in *OkCupid*'s profile structure away from listing "Ethnicity" and other "Details" information on a side menu of the profile to directly underneath the main profile photo in December 2015 further impacts how other users interpret the appearance of who they are looking at, as they will have their impressions of someone's phenotypic features influenced by the labels chosen, especially for those who choose "Other" or who show up as "Multi-ethnic" by virtue of selecting more than two options. Few women even mentioned noticing the change when I brought it up. Instead, they merely shared my curiosity as to why *OkCupid* would be motivated to adjust the profile displays. Yet, I was consistently told that specifying racial and ethnic identity in the profile was a way to avoid questions and that when people still asked, "What are you?" this was evidence that a person had not read the profile. So, pictures, written text, and the aspects of the profile that are filled out by checking boxes work together to frame multiracial and multiethnic women's experiences online.

"The first filters are your eyes": Judging Men's Profiles

As described in the previous section, women hold male users profiles to standards that they themselves do not always follow. For every woman I spoke to, pictures were very important in how appealing a potential partner was. As Corinne states:

> I do look for looks first. If you don't have a picture, I'm immediately not interested. I've seen pictures where if they have a beautiful background, so it's like artistically pleasing. I like that, it tells me something about their personality.

Quality and content of the photos are not the only important things, either; Gia claimed that the number of pictures would make her question a profile:

> He only has two pictures, which is okay, but if they only have one picture I usually won't talk to them. On the other hand, if they have too many pictures, I'm like why do you have so many?

The women I interviewed would often name some aspect having to do with photographs as something that rendered a profile unappealing. This came in the form of pictures with other women, shirtless pictures, or the stereotypical "hiking up a mountain" shot, though this latter option was really disliked by women who had no interested in outdoor activities. Women were overwhelmingly offended by men who had pictures with other women that were clearly not family members, as this suggested that they were not on the website to seriously date. The content of men's profiles was also significant, though secondary to the photos included on a profile. Some women read very in-depth, going from top to bottom, while others specified specific essay sections that they preferred to read such as the "Self-summary", the "Six things I could not live without", "What am I doing with my life", and the "You should message me if". Most women primarily read the "Self-summary" (10 out of 30) or whatever section comprised the first few lines of

the profile, with the "Six things" section following that in popularity. The very last section of the *OkCupid* profile, titled "Looking for" was also important in terms of deciding whether to write someone off or not. For most women if "casual sex" was included (the other options include "new friends", "long-term dating", and "short-term dating") they would be skeptical. Yet, the superficiality of online dating is an aspect that the women I interviewed found immensely frustrating. Samantha, a 26-year-old who identifies as a mixed-Hispanic, was one of several women who expressed a irritation with the focus on appearance, even as she continued to use online dating platforms to meet people (including nearly 80 people on *OkCupid* and 15 people from other platforms). For Samantha, her frustration had to do with the fact that she is larger-bodied. On the day that we met, her bright purple lipstick and winged eyeliner appeared particularly vivid against her minimally tanned skin and dark eyes. She self-described as both a "big girl" and as being "plus-size" despite maintaining an active life-style by bicycling around town. Samantha also seemed pretty interested in fashion and beauty culture based on our first meeting; we spent our time in line waiting on coffee discussing her "horror story" experiences with dying lavender streaks in her shoulder-length dark brown hair. Despite her seeming success in meeting people, Samantha expressed a fairly pessimistic attitude:

> Honestly, I kind find it annoying, just 'cause it's like the same thing over and over again. It's like, "Here's a picture of me, here's a picture of you. Do you like the way I look?" No, 'cause automatically, they all go for just how you look rather than what you're about. And you know, I'll admit that I'm kind of… I've been guilty of doing that too, like if I don't find you attractive or I don't feel like we wouldn't hit it off, like, I would just kind of swipe to the left. [laughs]

Though Samantha is annoyed by the tedious and ritualistic nature of matching with someone online, she also admits that she subjects men to the same scrutiny that she believes they subject her to. The assessment of men's profiles does not stop at the pictures, however; every woman I spoke with noted the importance of *OkCupid*'s "Match Questions" and the "Match" percentage. For some women, they would not even click on a profile that listed a low match percentage. The threshold that women described was anywhere from a 70 percent match to a 90 percent or greater match, though some were willing to ignore lower match percentages for men they viewed as especially attractive or who had an otherwise "good" profile with lots of detail. Of the thousands of possible match questions – over 275,000 as of 2011, many of which are actually submitted to *OkCupid* by users – there were several that women stated would tell them everything they needed to know. At the top of this list was the question that asked, "Would you strongly prefer to date someone of your own skin color/racial background?" Due to the fact that the women I interviewed overwhelmingly discussed either finding white men attractive or having extensive dating histories with white men, it would appear that this question's significance is directly related to the race of the men these women end up dating. Few women indicated being concerned that man of color would not want to date outside of their race; in fact, nearly every woman who mentioned getting messages from men who asked "Do you date outside of your race?" told me that these messages almost always came from men of color. So, based on the experiences of the 30 women I interviewed, white men interested in dating non-white women rarely expect that women of color will not date them, whereas many men of color operate under an assumption that some

women – particularly those perceived as non-white – might not be interested in dating men of color. Though Marie, a 26-year-old who identifies as Arab and white, stated that she explicitly chose "Other" as one of her racial and ethnic identifiers on her profile for the "people who don't date within their ethnicity, I want them to know to not to talk to me," she also stated that someone who said they did not want to date outside of their race on this match question would not automatically be ruled out if they messaged her. Slender-framed and olive-skinned with large green eyes, Marie was another of my respondents who generally conformed to mainstream standards of attractiveness, with her multiple ear-piercings and a septum nose ring giving her a bit of Austin quirkiness. Yet, she had an awkwardness to her body language, made visible by the way she hunched down in her seat and nervously laughed throughout our interview. Marie's willingness to hear someone out was not shared by most of the other women I interviewed, especially the women who were darker-skinned and could not pass as white. In fact, it was one of my interview respondents who let me know that *OkCupid* had added a question about Black Lives Matter (in which the question stated, "_____ Lives Matter" with "Black" and "All" being the possible answers).

The value placed on *OkCupid* questions around race, while not surprising to me, does stand out from the questions that *OkCupid* itself claims are the most commonly answered. Most of the questions *OkCupid* names focus on sex and what the website's in-house analysts term "weird sex" based on questions such as "Would you ever sleep with a serial killer?" (Cooper 2017). Amongst the responses that women gave me, the answers to several other questions were prioritized on men's accounts. Which of these questions

mattered tended to depend on the woman's appearance. For instance, lighter-skinned, white-passing women were likely to prioritize questions about women's obligations to alter their appearance, with questions like:

- "Do you think women have an obligation to keep their legs shaved?"
- "What pubic hair style do you prefer for a partner?"

Others who were concerned about sex and drug use looked at the following questions:

- "Would you consider role-playing a rape fantasy if your partner asked you to?"
- "Do you enjoy doing drugs?"
- "How often would you say you get WICKED WASTED?"

Still others who described themselves as "liberals" found questions about the LGBTQ community to be telling about a potential partner:

- "Do you think homosexuality is a sin?"
- "The thought of a gay or lesbian couple raising children is: (acceptable or not acceptable)"

Further, around half of the women I spoke to mentioned "bad" grammar as a turn-off, which perhaps is not surprising considering how educated my sample is. In fact, many match questions reference grammar, spelling errors, and writing style in some way, and as Christian Rudder (2011) argues, those who identify as less religious are less accepting of poor grammar and lower-level writing ability.

It is clear that a number of factors come into play when women are making decisions about men online; depending on a combination of their photos, the narrative within their written essays and their answers to OkCupid's Match Questions, as well as

any commentary included in direct messages, multiracial and multiethnic women describe a complex and in many ways, contradictory, logic for how to select which men are worthy of dating. Further, the fact that women pay such close attention to these aspects of men's profiles serves as insight into why women also spend so much time crafting these aspects of their own profiles. In reciprocating the degree of assessment they perceive themselves being subjected to, the mixed-race women I spoke with demonstrate the power and control that online dating gives them over their romantic lives.

Conclusion: The Power of Pictures

Based on the above findings, I argue that multiracial and multiethnic women rely much more heavily on their photographs and the identity options on *OkCupid* to draw attention to their racial and ethnic identities, rather than writing about them extensively in their essays. Across the 225 profiles sampled for content analysis, very few ever mentioned in the essay sections anything about being multiracial, with those who did merely reiterating the same categories that they had already selected from *OkCupi*d's available options. The closest that any profiles got to alluding to mixedness was in the section, "The first things people usually notice about me", where users would note things like their eye color or their hair. However, white users often draw attention to the fact that people notice their eye color, so I cannot argue that this is characteristic of mixed-race users. Further, the women I interviewed noted that they would point out things about themselves that a potential date would be surprised about in person, such as being very tall or being overweight, rather than focusing on their racial and ethnic identities.

However, the fact that photos – both on the women's profiles and on prospective romantic partners' profiles – retain primacy in terms of establishing attractiveness indicates that online dating practices are only marginally different from off-line practices. As my respondent Shelby quipped, "the first filters are your eyes." In the non-virtual world, most people base their attraction to another person based on what they can observe. As many women described when discussing the difference between dates that start online versus meeting someone in a public venue like at a party, the bar, or the grocery store, the biggest difference is that online profiles provide an opportunity to get all the details that would come out in small talk out of the way, essentially speeding up the process of developing a bond. Thus, the effort and attention paid to selecting images for a profile evidenced in the above chapter is in-line with other studies that discuss impression management online. If multiracial women do experience any advantages when it comes to online dating – as Celeste Curington and colleagues (2015) and Christian Rudder (2014) argue, mixed-race users are rated more attractive on *OkCupid* – I would argue that it first has to do with the way that their photographs are perceived by other users and secondly, with whatever racial and ethnic identity options they select.

Of additional interest here is the discrepancy between what women described as being important to include in their profiles (such as pictures with and without makeup, full body photographs, or pictures engaged in some activity) and what I observed in the content analysis of a larger sample of OkCupid profiles. Further, many women would include photos that they would essentially punish male users for including on their profiles, particularly selfies and pictures with other people who are not family. I believe

that this is an example of the bias that heterosexual users have in terms of gender role congruence (Chappetta and Barth 2016); because selfies are not only considered an example of vanity but are also considered feminine, men that post selfies – especially multiple selfies – on their profiles are rendered less masculine and therefore, less attractive. Gender presentation and adherence to normative standards of beauty, then, become the predominant means of crafting a "successful" online dating profile. This remains in line with scholars who attest to gender conformativity and normative beauty as having primacy in terms of how idea partners are defined, especially in the case of casual or short-term relationships (Cottrell et al. 2007; Sprecher and Regan 2002).

These findings do provide useful insight into the process of crafting social media profiles and how the logics that women use to articulate the reasons behind their choices are influenced by what they see in other users profiles and what they imagine others will see in theirs. For mixed-race women who are dating both on- and off-line, appearance and ethnic identity factor in to how women are racialized, how they racialize others, and therefore, how racial dynamics play out within a given interaction. For instance, throughout the interviews that I will draw from in the following chapters, darker-skinned women who are mixed with black often experience racial insults about their bodies or communities they may share ties with, especially when attempting to, or successfully, dating white men. When looking at the broader experiences with race and ethnicity that women disclosed during their interviews, I provide evidence that the lighter-skinned mixed-race women who can pass into whiteness perceive themselves as experiencing race less in these initial interactions online, focusing more on the gendered aspects of

their experiences. These are aspects that are hard to grasp when looking at profiles and, as demonstrated in this chapter, even when asking women directly about how they create their profiles. It would seem that women are reticent to name how race factors into their presentation of self online, wanting to focus more on just being "generally" attractive, a conception that implies that attractiveness transcends racial lines. In the next chapter, I will begin to unpack this issue further by discussing the next stage of the dating process, wherein multiracial and multiethnic women engage in a variety of practices when meeting and vetting potential partners to determine compatibility. These strategies are rooted in the connections women draw between attitudes on social attitudes and assumed behavior in relationships.

CHAPTER 4

DATING IN THE TIME OF #BLACKLIVESMATTER AND #NOBANNOWALL, OR, VETTING STRATEGIES IN A POST-RACIAL ERA[6]

Introduction

> At *OkCupid*, we believe that judging others based on their sex, religion, country of origin, or orientation is un-American. There is no room for intolerance.
>
> Instead, we've celebrated individuality in all its various forms since we were founded. Our users live in 214 countries around the world. They identify as 22 genders and 13 orientations. They are Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, Atheists, Buddhists and Agnostics.
>
> We strongly believe that America's history of welcoming others not only represents the best of American values, but it also defines the core of what has made our country the great place it is, and has been. Love, not hate, is the solution. *OkCupid* is open to all individuals. Thanks for making *OkCupid* a welcoming place.
>
> – emailed statement from *OkCupid* on January 31, 2017, following a presidential executive order that banned immigration from seven majority-Muslim nations

"Love, not hate, is the solution." These words, while certainly well meaning, ring especially hollow in our present times. In extolling the virtues of *OkCupid* and its apparent ability to bring people together across a range of gender identities, sexual orientations, and religions, the site attempts to present a utopic space where all people are welcome and all people seemingly can have the opportunity to meet their own unique, special someone. Here, *OkCupid* presents its own version of the narrative that "all Americans are immigrants," claiming that America is great because it is welcoming.

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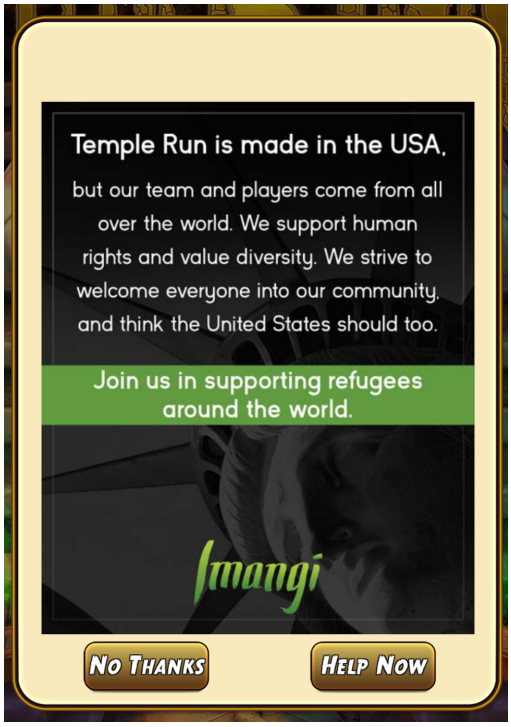
[6] Portions of this chapter have been published in the following article: Buggs, Shantel G. 2017. "Dating in the Time of #BlackLivesMatter: Exploring Mixed-race Women's Discourses of Race and Racism" in *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*. DOI: 10.1177/2332649217702658

America is great because love "trumps" hate. This statement is rife with American Exceptionalism and yet, racial difference is conspicuously absent in this heartwarming offering. It is all the more curious that race is missing as a category that *OkCupid* does not believe others should be judged on considering that race is one of several search categories for "background" on the site. Perhaps racial identity – or "ethnicity" as the website frames it – falls under the umbrella of country of origin in this statement. However, considering the ways that *OkCupid* itself has participated in publishing the racial and ethnic discrimination that occurs on its platform (see Rudder 2014, as well as the platform's blog, *OkTrends*), it seems more likely that *OkCupid* is hoping to gloss over the fact that race not only matters in the broader social world but also in specific and meaningful ways within the confines of their matchmaking algorithms and "background" search mechanisms.

By hiding behind other markers of diversity, *OkCupid* communicates a specific vision of the post-racial world, one where daters are provided an array of potential choices and implicitly, one where these daters are the object of many peoples' desires. If *OkCupid* is a welcoming place as stated in the quote that opens this chapter, then there is seemingly hope that the current political and social struggles that are plaguing the American populace can either be avoided or overcome. It remains telling that *OkCupid* and myriad other tech companies – such as the ride-share platform, *Lyft*, and even video game applications like *Temple Run* (see Figure 4.1) – have recently released statements supporting refugees and immigrants to the United States in the midst of the blatantly white supremacist policy interventions of the current occupant of the White House. The

January 2017 executive order issued by the President claims to "protect the nation from foreign terrorist entry", yet it only targets predominantly Muslim nations. In addition to the statements from the likes of *OkCupid*, demonstrations at airports across the country exploded in the days following the issuance of the executive order. Though subsequent attempts to revise and reissue this order have resulted in demonstrations and other public organizing, as well as other public statements from companies, there have yet to be similar outpourings of support for black victims of police violence and lead poisoning or

Figure 4.1: Screenshot of *Temple Run* Support for Refugees



even the environmental and physical violence enacted upon the Sioux Nation protesting the Dakota Access Pipeline. Of many social issues that have entered the mainstream

political consciousness over the last several years, the coalescence around the particular issue of immigration and support for diversity places the experiences of the women I interviewed into interesting relief. While social media and other tech companies utilize inequality as a way to cater to their consumers, the multiracial women in this study illustrate how social issues inform the choices that people make in their intimate lives.

In this chapter, I will discuss the strategies that women utilize to "vet" potential romantic partners, tracing their use of social issues with mainstream media coverage as a tool to assess another person's politics and subsequently, their compatibility. Next, I will analyze the notion of a "middle ground" for women who worried about seeming "extreme" in their beliefs. Finally, I will discuss how logics of anti-blackness pervade the responses of the multiracial and multiethnic women I interviewed and why the ways that women talk about race matters for their dating practices.

The National Conversation on Race

As Khury Petersen-Smith (2015) suggests, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement that began in 2014 has "shattered what remained of the notion of a 'post-racial' America," forcing much of mainstream media to address – however ineptly – issues such as anti-black racism, mass incarceration, and police brutality. Due to the visibility of BLM as a movement and organization, as well as affiliated large-scale protests, marches, and occupations, many Americans have had little opportunity to remain completely oblivious to contemporary issues around race in the United States. The near constant discussion of police(-ing) and BLM on major news networks and on

social media provides rhetorical frames within which everyday conversations and understandings of race and racism operate. The ways in which the U.S. populace contends with issues of racial and ethnic inequality have been further impacted by large-scale demonstrations such as the Women's March on January 21st, 2017, in addition to more localized organizing and protesting at major airports in response to immigration bans or at courthouses in response to attempts to legislate against so-called "sanctuary cities" that deign to extend protections to undocumented immigrants.

Though the current "national conversation on race" – which John Hartigan, Jr. (2010) describes as the "sprawling, unwieldy, often maddening" means by which U.S. society evaluates and discusses what counts as "racial" (x-xi) – seems most concerned with how whites and blacks are responding to BLM, there is an growing concern for the plight of immigrants, Muslims, and refugees. As Dawn M. Dow, Dana R. Fisher, and Rashawn Ray found in their survey of Women's March participants in Washington, D.C., approximately 33% of people were attending a protest for the first time (Dow et. al 2017). Though Dow and her colleagues found that over 60% of the protest participants were at the March in support of women's rights, the next most pressing reasons included the environment (35.5%), racial justice (35.1%), LGBTQ rights (34.7%), and reproductive rights (32.7%) specifically. This suggests that there are several reasons people find important enough to motivate them to participate in collective action and that we may be witnessing increases in activism and general awareness of social issues. Still, media concern remains limited in how it has been directed toward issues impacting black people and non-black people of color, as even the coverage of the Dakota Access pipeline

protests have privileged white "water protectors" like actress Shailene Woodley. The discourse(s) surrounding those in support of immigration utilize a "we are all immigrants" narrative that privileges European immigration histories.

Amidst all of the social issue turmoil that has come to define contemporary America, little attention has been paid to where multiracial people fit within these pressing political concerns, aside from spaces like *Daily Kos* – a political blogging outlet and discussion forum – touting a pair of so-called biracial twins as the "universe's beautiful answer to white supremacy" (see Figure 4.2 and Einenkel 2017). It is crucial to consider how broader social issues and the movements that are springing up to address them have individual-level implications. During the year in which I conducted my interviews, many social issues were of great concern to the women I met. They spoke of their worries around the BLM movement, rampant Islamophobia, the infringement upon women's rights – particularly reproductive rights – and about the then candidacy of Donald J. Trump. The national conversation around race consistently held primacy in terms of how these multiracial and multiethnic women understood and spoke about race in the United States, especially with their understandings of their own identities. Though some women would name BLM directly when we discussed race – especially a so-called post-racial society – most women used language such as "the racial climate" and "what's going on right now", as well as naming locations such as Dallas, Texas, Ferguson, Missouri, and Charleston, South Carolina. While these findings are certainly relevant for how discourses in mass media trickle down into everyday life, what I found to be more pressing was the fact that several women turned discussion on these topics into a means

Figure 4.2: Screenshot of the *Daily Kos* Twitter Post on Biracial Twins

of determining the date-ability of a potential partner. By using current social issues as a tool to select dating partners, as part of what I term *vetting strategies*, multiracial women illustrate how broader social issues and contemporary social movements can have an impact on the choices people make in their intimate lives.

Dating Strategies and Linking Attitudes to Behaviors

When people form close relationships, they develop strategies to guide their selections of partners, making judgments about others' suitability (Cottrell et al. 2007). The ability to discern aspects of a potential partner's personality is most significant when considering long-term relationships, with people looking for evidence of honesty, warmth and intelligence, among other traits (Regan et al. 2000; Sprecher and Regan 2002; Stewart et al. 2000). In particular, research has found that low-income black women pursuing cohabitating unions engage in a process of "vetting and letting" in order to ensure the well-being of their children (Reid and Golub 2015). Though this vetting of male partners is child-focused, mothers are able to assess how certain partners will be as parents and can apply lessons learned from previous relationships. The deliberative nature of this vetting process illustrates the need for dating tools to assist in building functional relationships. Women in my study who are white-skinned/white-appearing and those who are more brown-skinned described very different experiences in their interviews in terms of how to present their views on race. Further, how these multiracial women are able to render myriad social and political occurrences as tools in their dating toolkit speaks to the deliberative nature of "vetting" as a process. As Hartigan, Jr. (2010) states, the media spectacles that form our national conversation on race reflect changing sensibilities regarding race and the "racial," as well as both reinforcing and revising cultural precedents (p. 11). The mixed-race women I interviewed are not only engaging in the perpetuation of white and colorblind logics; they are occasionally using the

discourses and logics around the "racial" in order to determine who might be a viable dating partner.

Based on broader discourses around the progressivity of mixed-race people and interracial families, even I had to contend with my personal assumptions that multiracial women might hold similar and progressive stances on race. This narrative is supported on a surface-level by the ways that the women I interviewed consistently state, "race does not matter" in terms of whom they choose to date. Yet, the fact that my participants' responses to the issue of racism had a clear color-line division illustrates that the racialized and gendered dimensions of *which* women get to proclaim that race does not matter can be messy. The ways in which people are articulating their beliefs around race, especially when used as a tool to regulate their intimate lives, has important implications for not only the increasing political polarization of the U.S. (Anderson et al. 2014; Klofstad et al. 2013) but also for illuminating how the racial inequality being witnessed online operates beyond the confines of the internet. Further, a litany of studies have found that the racial and gender composition of neighborhoods, workplaces, social networks, and church congregations (see Desai et al. 2014; Ellison et al. 2013; Perry 2013, 2014) in the United States has an effect on people's attitudes toward a variety of social issues, namely things like the relationship between social integration and white people's attitudes toward interracial marriage with people of black, Latino, or Asian descent (Perry 2013). The fact that greater integration of these social spaces correlates to more positive support for interracial marriage suggests that there is a link between racial attitudes and behavior.

Presumably, those who support interracial marriage are less biased, though even this contention is challenged by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2013), who finds that even "progressive" white women who support racial equality will rely on certain colorblind frames to position themselves against (or as ambivalent toward) things like interracial marriage. So, when daters view what they believe symbolizes a certain "behavior" in a dating profile (or whatever actual behaviors they witness when they do start to build intimate relationships) they will be inclined to connect those behaviors to attitudes on race, ethnicity, gender, and class as well as other highly contentious social issues in the U.S. The connections daters draw between information located within dating profiles rely on various forms of cultural capital, particularly any previous experiences that people bring with them from their families or prior relationships. For instance, Corinne Mason (2016) argues that the phenomenon of including humanitarian and "voluntourism" pictures on *Tinder* dating profiles speaks to the intersections of sexualized and racialized benevolence, particularly the idea that "holding an African baby makes someone 'hot'" (p. 2). In this case, daters render themselves more appealing by appearing as "good whites" (p. 12-13). Additionally, participation in activities like humanitarian travel suggests that a person has a specific educational and class background, rendering them more desirable within a culture that privileges those with the access to things like passports. Because daters read so much into how people present themselves online and on dates, a focus on how potential dates talk about race and racism (among other issues) is a logical extension of how to determine partner compatibility, particularly as a signifier of educational and class backgrounds.

Vetting a Partner

Dating practices and the ways that people talk about social issues are not only indicative of how people signify their politics, but also demonstrate how shared meanings of race, racism, and the so-called post-racial are shifting in contemporary U.S. society. For instance, Amy Steinbugler (2012) argues that interracial relationships allow sociologists to study broader racial inequality. In mobilizing potential partners' stances on current social issues as a metric of racial progressiveness, the mixed-race women in this study recognize that the ways a person talks about what is happening in the world not only provides information about that persons politics, but allows for an estimation of how that person might treat others in relationships. The women I spoke with seemed to believe that bringing up "current events" would give them sense of what they might have to deal with once a relationship became more serious. For instance, Aidah (introduced in Chapter 3) was clear that politics are impactful on how she navigates every day life:

> Every single day I read the news and I'm horrified. After 9/11, like every single day I hear something about a Muslim women being pushed into oncoming traffic or in front of a train. Like the other day on 6th Street like two Hispanic guys and a black guy were arrested and brutally attacked… I think there are more Caucasian people willing to believe that racism is over than like minorities. There are lots of Caucasian people who act like racism is over and that they don't see race and that they don't see color. The idea that we have a mixed president now racism is over, it's just not true. It's not reported on, it's not on their news feed. It's not on their radar.

Here, Aidah could easily name several incidences that stuck out to her as having to do with race, including vandalism at several local mosques. These events were upsetting, yet she suggests that people of color have more of an expectation for these kinds of

incidences compared to white people. Later in our conversation, she noted the influence of these kinds of events:

> I mean, I don't hide – my last name's Islamic. I don't hide it. I'm very proud of the name. If they ask, you know I'll tell them. The last guy I dated, he um told me I was an extremist because I didn't drink and I was wearing a dress with him and my boobies were out and …I asked him, "do you know what an extremist is?" I was wearing a dress above my knee, and it was, you know, not like the most conservative dress? And I was surprised he even called me that. And he called me that because I don't drink, too. And I'm like what? Just 'cause I don't want like… I have a very addictive nature so I just stop myself before I do something stupid. *That's* why I don't drink.

In this disturbing story, Aidah illustrates how narratives around Islamic extremism have infiltrated her dating life. Despite being dressed in a way that she believed signaled her less-conservative values (she described herself as a "very liberal Muslim" and as she notes here, her reasons for not drinking were not necessarily religious), the Hispanic man she was on a date with still connected her Muslim-ness – seemingly through her name and brown skin – with so-called extremism. Yet, more than other social issues, BLM provides a specific cultural touch point for women in my study to articulate what they think (and know) about race in the United States. Though many women articulated concerns around things like Islamophobia, anti-immigrant rhetoric, and Asian fetishism, BLM and specific incidences that were picked up by the movement – like the localized incidences of Sandra Bland's arrest in Prairie View, Texas, and her subsequent death while jailed or the assault on a young black teenage girl at a pool party in an affluent area of the Dallas metro-area – had a particular resonance. For clarity, other topics that achieved this level of specificity were things like the presidential election and LGBTQ discrimination. However, like other "race stories" that are displayed, consumed, and

debated in broader U.S. mass media, BLM is one of many social phenomena that continues shaping mainstream assumptions about, and perceptions and experiences of, what Hartigan, Jr. (2010) calls "the racial" (p. 10). Hartigan, Jr. (2010) notes that the racial can often seem ambiguous and rife with disagreement; for the multiracial women who consider their potential dating partners' views on issues of race and racism important information to evaluate, it is evident that these women have fairly definite ideas about what counts as "racial." Many women described already having conversations about race with their friends and family, so those who did want to bring up race with dating partners often had prior preparation for how to talk about a contentious issue like race with someone they care for.

As Marie (an Arab and white 27-year-old first introduced in Chapter 3) notes, listening to what potential dating partners say is important:

> …if I was on a very casual date with someone I just met, and they brought up race, that would, that would probably end up being like - I would act like I wasn't taking it too seriously but I would definitely be paying attention to what they said about it.

Reading between the lines of what potential partners are saying explicitly and implicitly is an important means of determining compatibility. Marie stated that she needed to have a "similar enough understanding of the world" with the person she dates, agreeing on the important things while also being okay with slightly different politics. Key here is the performative aspect that Marie describes, where she must act as though she is not taking whatever racial topics that are brought up "too" seriously, yet also listening intently to what the person says. She later noted that while this was "a bit non-confrontational" and

that in the event that the person says something offensive, she should "tell them what I think so they can go home and think about it." Marie worried that if she told someone that they were wrong or was more vocal about her opinions that she might end up solidifying that person's prejudices. In fact, Marie shared this approach:

> …if I meet a white person, I kind of assume that they're racist just to be on the safe side. [laughs] Because they usually will, at some point down the line, will say something and I'll be like "well, I'm glad, you know, I'm not surprised."

In assuming that white people will be disappointing, Marie is striving to protect herself – this is evident in the way she talks about being on the "safe side" and not being surprised if a white person eventually disappoints her. This distrust serves as a strategy to manage any number of relationships, not just romantic ones. As she states, when she has confronted people who she felt were wrong, it did not go well and she feared playing a role in strengthening a person's biases. Marie seemed most concerned with having to manage someone's racism within a romantic relationship. Marie never mentioned her family members warning her that she would need to be careful around certain people; she developed this position based her experiences with Islamophobia – as a woman of Arab descent – and her background in studying political science in college. We discussed at length how her undergraduate major influenced her understandings of inequality in the world. However, her own more personal experiences with discrimination were key in developing her mistrust of men:

> The racism I've tasted it's just not like, not like anti-black racism. Mine seems to be specific to what's like going on in the world right now. It wasn't online but it was this Vietnamese dude who called me a "terrorist." This was at like a crawfish boil.

> Yeah, I think he was kind of joking about it, like "Oh ha-ha, what kind of terrorist are you?" and I'm like "What?" Yeah, no…people – I had this guy, some like ex-Army dude came up to me like at a bar and he's all "Oh, this and that, you're Arab I can tell" and I'm like "Oh great, that's not good that you can tell." [laughs] And um, he starts talking to me about female genital mutilation and then we kind of start like, yelling at each other about it and like, I was laughing 'cause I kind of thought the whole thing was ridiculous. And he took me laughing at this as like flirting with him and at the end of this interaction, he tried to kiss me. And I was like, I can't – I was like "Whoa! I can't believe you're trying to kiss me!"

In these two incidences, Marie describes the ways that men in public spaces – one Vietnamese and the other, white – approach her based on their readings of her as a racial "other." It is important that Marie recognizes this racism that she experiences as different from anti-blackness while also identifying it as related, deriving from Islamophobia and Orientalism. The Orientalist lenses that these men are seeing Marie through – rooted in the ways that they respectively ask her what "kind" of terrorist she is and engage her in a debate on female genital mutilation – demonstrate how Western notions about the Middle East become the means to engage. In associating Marie's Arab-ness with terrorism and seemingly making it into a joke, the Vietnamese man she encounters at a crawfish boil seemingly illustrates a comfort with joking about certain forms of racialized violence (perhaps due to the fact that he is a person of color) while also deliberately wanting to call attention to Marie's racial difference. Further, Marie's encounter with the "ex-Army dude" is one that she described as happening quite often when she goes out to bars, with white men aiming to assert a particular kind of militarized and worldly masculinity that hinges on "knowing" Marie based on her appearance but also, apparently, knowing about her culture or her people. While female genital mutilation is an extremely bizarre topic with which to hit on someone at a bar, this man seemed to have a desire to demonstrate

that he had knowledge about the world beyond the United States, while also trying to situate the U.S. as a place that was better than the places he had been sent to wage war. A similar experience happened at another bar when a group of men approached:

> …there was like a whole group of like white Army dudes who were out drinking at a bar and they were like "Hey, come take a picture with us" and I was like "Hell no, like I'm not gonna get in a picture with you." Why, why in the entire fuck would I do that? I was like no. And they were like "Why not?" and I was just like, I, I don't want to. Like I don't want to take a picture with a bunch of Army guys. And I did say that. And one of them was like "Hey, if you knew what we were doing over there you would thank us!" And then I was like "Ah man, fuck you!" and he was like, I don't know - one of them bought me a beer and I was like thanks, I'm gonna go to the other side of the room now. [laughs]

The association of Arab and Muslim nations with female genital mutilation (see: von der Osten-Sacken and Uwer 2007) expands the realm of places where the West is "needed" to intervene on behalf of women and girls. The use of military personnel to assist in this intervention contributes to the imperialist legacies of the West in North Africa and the Middle East. Thus, a group of "Army guys" see themselves as saviors deserving "thanks" for what they are doing "over there." Further, the group of men in Marie's third story wanted to take a picture with her, as though she were some kind of trophy or prize that demonstrated their attractiveness and goodness. Marie and I discussed how this reminded us of the phenomenon of "voluntourism" – the increasingly popular form of tourism where affluent young people travel to impoverished locales in order to "pad their resumes" with service work in orphanages and schools (Kahn 2014) – with well-meaning white Westerners posing with darker-skinned "locals" in order to demonstrate how they were good people. I am also reminded of a scene from the Tony Award-winning musical, *American Idiot*, where one of the main characters – Tunny, a "disaffected suburban

youth" who runs away to the city and subsequently, joins the military – has a fever dream in the hospital after being shot and hallucinates that his nurse – possibly an Arab woman – is dancing around in him dressed in a glittery red costume reminiscent of a belly dancer, complete with a veil across her face. Curiously though, Marie notes that she has "a bad habit of laughing" during these kinds of encounters and not treating them as "teachable moments" for the white men who are saying offensive things. She states, "Instead I'm like, tell me more about what you think." This position is one that Marie described not necessarily as being productive but as sometimes hypocritical and a means for her to understand "both sides." As she stated earlier, she performs an almost false curiosity so that she can listen intently to the things that these men are saying. To come back to Marie's practice of not trusting white people until they prove themselves to not be racist (while also performing a seemingly neutral attitude), it would appear that this strategy is borne from a history of disappointing experiences. The narrative of actively striving to avoid potentially racist partners was shared by women who had past experiences of discrimination as well as those who held particular politics that did not approve of anti-blackness, Islamophobia, or racism (defined broadly). In fact, for Marie, men had become so disappointing that at the time of our interview she was planning to stop dating men (possibly permanently) in favor of women.

Of course, Marie is not alone in not being completely trustful of white people. One of my earliest interviews, Kai, a 22-year-old who identifies as black and Asian, was the first woman to make me think about the role of appearance in navigating dating in the contemporary moment. Barely over five feet tall and medium-brown skinned with waist-

length curly, bleach-blonde ombré hair, Kai shared my experience with being mistaken for a Pacific Islander and a darker-skinned Latina. Her brown-ness seemed to consistently elicit comment, as she pointed to being called both "mocha" and "sun-kissed" by other people as examples. She shared:

> I think the most important thing is that even though he's white, he's able to talk intelligently about current events…I have never – or so far, I have not – heard him say something and been like "What the fuck? Where did that come from?" It's all been stuff that either I agree with or we can debate about. I don't need a person that all of our beliefs necessarily match up perfectly but as long as he can talk about why he thinks that way or he can see my point of view, I think that's important. Especially when it comes to like race things and cultural identity and stuff like that.

Kai perceived the man she was dating at the time of our interview to have the skills and knowledge to have an intelligent conversation on race and politics. Her response implies that someone incapable of making informed and non-problematic commentary on race would not be someone she is interested in dating. Based on the rest of her interview, this is related to the fact that Kai is half-black and strongly identifies with her blackness. This became more salient as she acknowledged the anti-blackness that plagues many Asian communities, particularly things she had heard from other people in school. Though Kai did not indicate that her own Asian family members – who are Vietnamese and Chinese – had ever expressed any anti-black sentiments to her, it seemed pretty clear that dating someone who was not racist, but especially someone who was not anti-black, was important. The concerns around anti-blackness are tied to Kai being what she described as visibly brown-skinned. Unlike several other half-Asian women I interviewed, Kai was consistently recognized as a racial other, i.e. non-white. Kai's visibility as a (mixed-)

black woman were critical for how her sexuality and gender presentation were viewed, as she noted being concerned about being called pet names such as "mocha princess", a phrase the white man she was dating at the time of our interview had used to describe her. She also kept coming back to how she worried about the assumptions men would make about her Asian-ness in terms of hypersexuality or demureness.

Similarly, Allyson (a white and Filipino 27-year-old first introduced in Chapter 3) discusses the difficulties she has had getting past what she terms "white guy attitude," which she considers devoid of anti-racist and anti-sexist politics. In fact, she states that she is more likely to trust a man of color than a white guy, even going so far as to suggest that white men are unsafe:

> I'm tired of dudes who don't realize that things are going well for them because of a structural system that supports them? I don't know [laughs]. …I get really tired of um, of dudes who don't notice the way – I don't know, I don't like guys that seem completely privileged and clueless about it. …I think it's easier for a white guy to not take time for that kind of politics…Yeah, I think I'm way more likely to trust a guy of color than I am a white guy. Like, I am way more likely to want to meet them in person or to feel like, physically safe around them.

When Allyson says that she is more likely to want to meet a man of color and to feel safer around him, she is making assumptions about the politics that man of color would have in the current moment. Presumably, a man of color will not question that racism is real or that there may be a structural system that oppresses some social groups in the U.S. It is telling that Allyson – who described herself as a "white privileged mixed-race Asian American" – has a negative outlook toward white men, even as she noted that approximately 80-90 percent of the men who message her on *OkCupid* are white and that most of the men she has dated have also been white. Allyson seemed to both

acknowledge the problematic lack of diversity in her own dating practices and resign herself to the racialized power dynamics of *OkCupid* and other dating platforms that tend to privilege white men. For many of the women I interviewed, white masculinity has a particular meaning in this political climate. These women expect that the white men they may consider dating should have a certain *racial literacy* – the racial socialization and antiracist training that defends against and counters racism (Twine 2010) – and appear hard-pressed to consider dating (white) men who are not at least marginally versed in anti-racist language and ways of thinking. It is well documented that politics – of the conservative or liberal variety – influence the dating practices of monoracial people (Klofstad et al. 2012, 2013). In fact, among conservative black and white online daters, people were overwhelmingly more likely to select same-race partners compared to liberal daters (Anderson et al. 2014). Though this is clear evidence of homophily (McPherson and Smith-Lovin 1987) – the tendency to associate with similar others – and the ways in which people maintain cohesive social networks, it also suggests that people aim to date people who are "similar" (Joyner and Kao 2005, McClintock 2010). Though Marie, Kai, and Allyson do not suggest that white men are similar others, these men could become similar (enough) and viable dating partners if they are able to articulate anti-racist politics. This is not necessarily a requirement for all potential partners, as several women assumed that men of color will just "get" that racism exists. So, white men are tasked with providing proof that they "get it," much of which is proven through how they engage with discourses around race and racism.

Other women stated that while they care about politics, they would not feel comfortable bringing these issues up on a date. Yet, getting men to share their thoughts on "what's going on" is a means of determining whether a person is compatible in other areas. Jacinta – a 24-year-old who identifies as black and white – was particularly direct about this. Petite-framed, Jacinta's background as dancer gave her defined muscles, particularly "big" thighs that she described as making her "thick." Her burgundy dyed shoulder-length hair complemented her light-brown skin tone and her brown eyes. Though she wore her hair blown out straight during our meeting, she noted that she was proud of her curly hair and liked when someone she dated liked her hair in its natural state. When it came to initiating conversations on dates, Jacinta shared:

> Well, not really politics, although if you're for Donald Trump just GTFO [get the fuck out] like I can't, I have no patience. And it's the same people who have…apathy towards the racial climate. That is a huge, *huge* turnoff. 'Cause it started about last year or the year before…like the Ferguson thing. …then it was the "I Can't Breathe" and then the pool party *[in Dallas]*! I showed the pool party to one of the guys and he was just like "well, I mean…" and I was like "what do you mean, 'well, I mean'? That's awful, that's disgusting, she's just a kid!" If you don't even care about that we're probably not going to agree on other things. And I want someone to – I'm not saying we have to, like I want to lead the parade or the march but – to at least respect that pain that we're experiencing with it as a community and to agree that something needs to be done.

Jacinta notes several incidences of "the racial" here in terms of things she would expect a potential dating partner to have knowledge about. She begins with Donald Trump, who at the time of our interview had not yet won the Republican nomination. Supporting him – not necessarily just because he is a Republican – is out of the question. Jacinta then moves to incidences she believes are illustrative of the racial climate at the time of our interview: the shooting of Michael Brown and subsequent protesting in Ferguson,

Missouri, the "I Can't Breathe" rallying cry that stemmed from the choking murder of Eric Garner in New York City, and a pool party in a suburb of Dallas, Texas where a teenage girl in a swimsuit was tackled and forcibly restrained by a police officer.

For Jacinta, "what's going on" did not seem to matter much until about two years prior to our interview, correlating with the rise in BLM demonstrations in cities such as Ferguson, Missouri and Cleveland, Ohio, in addition to the increased coverage of these actions by mainstream media outlets. As she states explicitly, "If you don't even care about that we're probably not going to agree on other things." A lack of concern or perhaps what would be perceived as an unacceptable level of knowledge about these racial incidents is sufficient to write off a possible dating partner. Jacinta's comment on not wanting to "lead the parade or the march" – suggesting that to participate in activist demonstrations could be too political and certainly not something she would ask of someone she was dating – indicates that she does not wish to appear too sensitive to racial issues despite their evident importance. While her statements do not necessarily negate that *someone* should be doing the political labor of protesting, it seems that she is navigating a fine line of pro-blackness. For Jacinta, it is a base-level expectation that someone would have some opinion on the current "racial climate" in order for her to better determine how she would get along this person in other areas of their lives. For multiracial and multiethnic women, listening to partners both during instances of levity and during serious, political discussion is a key strategy for determining compatibility. This aligns with the fact that many women look for specific answers to certain "Match Questions" on *OkCupid* (see Chapter 3) before even deciding to reply to messages.

Further, the use of "current events" as a cover for having more in-depth discussions around race and racism enables multiracial and multiethnic women to conceal some of their intentions, effectively gauging the positions of their romantic partners behind a veil of simply being interested in what is going on in the world in an unbiased way.

Looking for the Middle: When Vetting May Be "Extreme"

As much as bringing up certain issues was viewed as an effective means of vetting a potential partner, there was a great deal of agonizing over how bringing up social issues would make these women look. A common concern amongst the women I interviewed was a fear of existing on the (political) extremes. Would they lose desirability if they were open about their sentiments? For instance, Kai noted that she strove to locate what she termed a *middle ground* in order to not come across as too aggressive to other people, especially men she is starting to get to know romantically:

> …I have played the, "we should be colorblind and I'm not like those kinds of black people who are super aggressive about their race" and I'm "chill" about it and I've been that kind of person who doesn't have to water down my views. You know, I've been on both ends of the spectrum, both extremes. Trying to find the middle ground is hard and sometimes I don't know if I want to.

Here, Kai suggests that being "chill" about her own race and broader racial issues is a way of remaining appealing in a romantic context. When she moves to the other so-called extreme by being a person who "doesn't have to water down [her] views" she potentially becomes an off-putting person that someone might not want to date or even be friends with. The middle ground is a desirable position because it provides Kai access to compromise, a means of merging aspects of two opposing positions. Kai states that the

opposing "sides" pit being colorblind and not pushing race issues on [presumably white] people against being "aggressive" about race and "not watering down" ones views. So, the middle ground is space that actively works to avoid creating discomfort. This discomfort seems to stem from issues deemed political. Few women explicitly mentioned any political party affiliation, though several described themselves as fairly liberal or occasionally used identifiers such as feminist. However, many women – especially those who talked about being white-reading in appearance – expressed contradictory politics over the course of their interviews. In one moment, one woman could explain her concerns about gender inequality – such as equal pay or the more localized issue of access to reproductive healthcare that has been slashed by Texas House Bill (HB) No. 2 – and in the next moment share stories about how she was against Affirmative Action or that she believed that there was unfair treatment being directed at white people, especially those in law enforcement. After attesting that "race didn't matter" in terms of dating, women would then begin to list characteristics that either explicitly or implicitly had to do with race. Here, race would be alluded to either directly with references about physical traits or cultural practices that were not preferable (such as suggesting that "all Asian men look them same" and are therefore, not attractive) but also through class references. The invocation of class in the form of concerns over the kinds of interests a potential partner might have, their level of education, or the type of career they might have speaks to the ways that these multiracial women are using a combination of class and race to identify someone's cultural capital. This oscillation between political and social justice "extremes" was a defining characteristic of these interviews and decidedly so for the

women who were not part black. For instance, Nicole, a 28-year-old who identifies as Native American and white, states that she recognizes that there are "statistics out there" that suggest that Black or Hispanic people might face challenges that she does not, while lamenting that the U.S. was not a post-racial society:

> I do partly understand, because there are still statistics out there like "black men are in prison more than anyone else" and that kind of stuff. So, they are still facing challenges that I am specifically not facing. So, maybe, there are challenges that I don't see. And maybe, that's why these people are up in arms because they're facing problems that I don't even know exist. I'm walking around in my little ignorant bubble and they're dealing with the problem. I mean, I have my own problems that have to do with gender and socioeconomic status, but I'm paying attention to those more than race ones.

With her fair, freckled skin, long dark brown hair, and hazel-colored eyes, Nicole expressed concern that whiteness is "looked down upon." For this reason, she often identified more as Native American than white because she liked feeling "special." The fear of being on the "extremes" is racialized and gendered. For people of color, to be considered too concerned with race and racism leads to assumptions about bias and investment in being a victim. For women, to be extreme – politically or otherwise – is often to be viewed as being emotionally unstable, especially around issues of gender inequality. Women are increasingly socialized to hedge or temper their opinions and politics in order to be more readily accepted. This is even more crucial for women of color, as the desire to not appear aggressive or "bitchy" is especially high (Collins 2005). Thus, the middle ground provides a way to escape being associated with negative stereotypes along racial and gender lines, as well as means of keeping dating options open. For some women, the way to not appear aggressive was to use tactics such as

humor. Corinne (a Korean and white 31-year-old first introduced in Chapter 3) noted that she often had to deal with obnoxious commentary from men who would say things like, "I'm dating you because I have yellow fever." The white Jewish man who said this to Corinne was someone she had been casually dating for a short time at the time of our interview and was someone she described as being "too white-centric" (see Chapter 4). She explained:

> I was kind of offended but I was just like, "Oh, so, you're into malaria?" I made it about the actual disease instead of my race. I always try to offset stuff like that with humor. I've known people who are like into Asians because of nerd culture and they try to appropriate Asian culture because they want to be Asian. I have to correct them on stereotypes.

Here, Corinne describes her efforts to let people know what they are saying (or doing) is offensive. While she did not mention a hesitance to be vocal about her opinions – noting that her Korean mother raised her to be "emotionally withdrawn" and that she did not like passive-aggressive behavior – the fact that she resorts to turning the joke around on the person and then proceeds to continue dating him is interesting, especially in light of the ways that she describes her mother as "volatile" and one of the most racist people she has ever met in her life. Corinne seemingly treads the space between too aggressive – like her mother – and being an independent person who stands up for herself and does not let the people around her get away with everything. She effectively maintains her position as a cool and intellectual woman, avoiding being labeled in negative ways. Previously, Nicole had described her own experiences with this issue:

> Because the thing is, while I'm not specifically looking for it – if I'm specifically looking for racial injustice, I might find it more. Since I'm not specifically looking for it, I don't think I see it that often. Although, I listen to NPR, I read

> articles, and I hear things like Black males are inproportionately, you know, found guilty of crimes and sentenced to prison. I just know that that's a statistic out there that exists, but I'm not doing anything about it. …I've never been a person in any subject matter to go for one extreme or the other extreme. I feel like there's a middle ground for the solution to the problem and I feel like maybe I'm looking for the middle ground and I haven't found it yet.

Nicole was not alone in her assessment that extremes are undesirable. Many women expressed a desire for what the referred to as "diversity," though what diversity meant for them was not always clear. Most often, it felt that the women I interviewed were drawing on the logics of what Sara Ahmed (2012) terms a "public relations of diversity," where notions about equality and diversity are perpetuated and any explicit reference to or discussion of racism is viewed as problematic. The women in this study were definitely concerned with representational diversity – a visibility of different kinds of people, often based on race and physical appearance – as opposed to a diversity that challenges or undoes systemic inequality. The language of diversity that permeated my interviews sounds much like the diversity vocabulary that Ahmed describes as trying to establish and maintain good will. This good will may be what the women I interviewed are referring to when they describe trying to locate the middle ground. As these women describe it, to be in the middle on racial issues is not necessarily to be a moderate – which has political undertones – but to at least be capable of compromise or understanding of both sides. Thus, these women desire to be perceived as open-minded. While the middle ground is often referenced by academics as a political concept, many women wanted to remove themselves from the realm of politics in terms of affiliation(s) with political parties or platforms. This middle ground also calls to mind the notion of multiracial

people being a "bridge" between communities, a common narrative that suggests an inherent ability of mixed-race people to connect (with) people across racial divides. While the notion of the bridge depends on multiracial people having a better understanding of different racial groups due to presumably having parents of different races, it also requires a friendliness and eagerness to do the work of connecting others. In fact, research has suggested that black biracial adolescents are more adept at bridging friendships between black people and persons of other races compared to black or white adolescents (Quillian and Redd 2009). This narrative also became central to the tenure of President Barack Obama, with many hoping his election signaled a "more perfect union" and the beginning of a "post-racial" society (Dariotis and Yoo 2012). Though the bridge certainly operates in the same realm of optimism as the middle ground, the bridge describes a capability specifically associated with multiracial people. Perhaps, too, this middle ground is an internalization of multiracialist narratives that suggest that to be on the racial or political "extremes", e.g. identifying too closely with blackness or calling out anti-blackness, is to not be beyond race. Perhaps, too, the middle ground is a way to distract from not actively being in pursuit of a post-racial future.

Logics of Anti-blackness and Desiring Diversity

Many other women expressed contradictions depending on which identities – race, gender, sexual orientation or class – were described as being the most important to them. The intersections of varied identities not only inform political views, but also shape dating experiences. In particular, I found that multiracial women's responses varied along

skin-color and other aspects of physical appearance, and subsequently, along racial lines, with more white-skinned respondents – particularly those who are not of black descent – having less positive reactions to BLM. As previously stated, most of the women I interviewed identified as feminist and/or liberal. The reticence around supporting BLM (as opposed to some other social issues) indicates a conditional kind of liberalism or feminism, where certain social issues fall outside the realm of acceptability as these issues impact how women may be perceived. Additionally, colorism enables partially white multiracials to hold higher social status and gain preference in dating spaces. The women I interviewed who had more brown skin tone and more coarsely textured hair would discuss how their racialized physical appearance impacted their confidence in navigating dating much more often than white-appearing women, who often only talked about their level of fitness as what might deter potential partners (rather than skin tone, hair texture, or other features, such as a "black booty"). For instance, Samantha (a mixed-Hispanic 26-year-old first introduced in Chapter 3) shared her thoughts on how she believes other people see her as a potential partner:

> Sometimes, just because of the fact that I've had a lot of um a lot of black men say they like a lot of Hispanic, big booty women. And I'm like, well, that's nice but you know, if you're automatically telling me this, I'm automatically not even gonna try to acknowledge you. Just because then it falls back on like, the fetishes.

Here, it is evident that race influences how Samantha interprets the way that others respond to her. Though Samantha is fairly fair-skinned, her slight tan and longer dark hair, in addition to the fact that she lives in San Antonio, seemed to influence her being consistently perceived as Hispanic. Alternatively, Calla, a 36-year-old who identifies as

"Blaxican", described the ways in which the consistent comparison between herself and people of other races – especially a white friend of hers – lead to her being skeptical of men who have preferences for black women. Medium-brown skinned and slim-framed, Calla's most distinct features were her large full-color tattoos that wrapped around her forearms. It was humid the day we met, so we commiserated over the tendency of our hair to frizz up. Calla noted that she rarely wore her hair straight (though it was blown out straight during our interview) and that she was still learning how to best style her medium brown hair that reached well past her shoulders despite being cut into a layered style. She shared a story where a man talked about her as attractive but quipped, "she ain't got no ass, though"; Calla used commentary like this as evidence for why she felt safer around white people who did not seem to be looking for a so-called "black" body type. Considering the significance of skin color and racialized phenotype on perceived attractiveness, it makes sense that lighter-skinned women would embrace political and social stances that allow them to maintain their desirability, as various scholars have argued that racial identities are accompanied by different notions about sexuality and gender behavior (see Anzaldúa 2007; Collins 2005; hooks 1993). I found notable differences in how women conceptualized gender (in)equality based on what they felt was the most pertinent. For those women who were white-appearing, the pay gap or their boyfriends' expectations that they cook, clean, and maintain fit bodies were much more important concerns than anti-black racism or police brutality, which browner skinned women viewed as a central to their understandings of how a partner would treat them. This speaks to the ways that race – both personally identified and perceived – as well as

gender and class intersect to inform stances on issues. Corinne (a Korean and white 31-year-old first introduced in Chapter 3) shared that she is not interested in supporting black-focused movements because she concerns herself with "Korean stuff." Instead, she conveys her support in particular ways:

> I don't know, I'm just very about diversity…only thing I'm ever like "oh" about is Korean stuff because I'm Korean…I really only have one friend that race comes up and that's because he's really all about empowering black people right now, especially with all the events that have been going on. So, I support him…I'm usually on his side because I tend to agree with everything he's saying because I'm like, yeah, that's the way it should be.

For Corinne, the current tensions around race are issues of "diversity" – a sentiment held by other women in this study – and something that black people are particularly "ethnocentric" about. Diversity in this sense – merely serving as a cover for discussing racial "events going on" – becomes vague. While she discussed the need for access to spaces like film and television for people of color, Corinne's use of popular culture as her way to discuss racial inequality speaks very little to structural inequality in terms of who lives or who is incarcerated – both primary concerns for the BLM movement and the "events that have been going on." Further, she is content relying on her black male friend to do the work of empowering black people. Corinne saw no role for herself in contributing to this enfranchisement, and her admitted focus on "Korean stuff" such as food practices and the occasional cultural appropriation incident illustrate a stance that effectively minimizes the impact of colorblind and anti-black logics on mainstream media and broader U.S. society. Corinne seemed unconcerned with how her own desires

for white partners were linked to own her ability to pass as white and her perception of so-called "black issues" being something for only black people to worry about.

Alternatively, several women were not concerned with the "diversity" issues inherent in police violence but rather with the so-called "appropriate" behavior of those interacting with the police. This topic became a particularly contentious one with Kaitlyn, a 28-year-old who identified as white and Mexican. Kaitlyn was very vocal about her appearance, noting that while she is quite pale-skinned and freckled, she is still recognized as Hispanic due to her brown eyes and medium-brown wavy hair. She also spent a lot of the interview gesturing toward her body as a way to refer to her voluptuousness, at one point making a dramatic "X" with her arms across her chest and exclaiming "the double Ds!" when I asked her why she felt that men would ogle her in public. It seemed that Kaitlyn's interest in a police officer that she had recently met on *OkCupid* influenced her response to some of my questions, based on the following response to one of my questions:

> You know, we can also do like a five-hour discussion on like cops versus people. For me, I'm going to side with the cops. Because at the end of the day, they want to get home and if you're acting stupid, they can only assume you're on some kind of drug, which makes you even more dangerous.
>
> Now, do I believe we should take some stuff from European cops? Yes, because if someone is acting crazy…Don't go for the kill shot right away. …But I also don't like seeing on the news recently about how this dumb fucker of a kid was being very argumentative with a cop, very disrespectful and you know, acting more aggressive. And yet, the family is suing the police department…and so with the racial stuff, it's more how did the person *act*? Now do I believe there's bad cops out there? Yes. Do I believe there's bad people out there? Yes. And I believe, you know, sometimes you need better training? Yes. It's the same thing with dating; people make assumptions. And it's like, what is it, left swipe?

Kaitlyn is direct in stating that officers should assume people are dangerous if they are "acting stupid." Within this explanation, she invokes some neoliberal talking points with her suggestions that officers "not go for the kill shot right away" or that police personnel need better training. These statements may not vilify police officers but they clearly advocate for some structural change in terms of how policing should operate. This attitude is reflected in the assortment of legislative interventions being pushed across the country in an effort to achieve greater accountability for instances of brutality and to facilitate more friendly police-community relations. However, Kaitlyn also utilizes anti-black logic that implies that those killed by police are deserving aggressors. Kaitlyn's commentary seems to blend the stances of those who support police officers and those who recognize that (some of) the violence that has been meted out against black people is wrong. Virtually all of the women who oppose BLM rely on a "bad apples" logic – suggesting that instances of brutality or misconduct are rare and anomalous – to make a case for why the movement is overly sensitive. When Kaitlyn notes that the violence is on "both sides," she equates institutionalized, state-sanctioned violence against citizens with the supposedly more egregious violence that every day citizens can do to each other. It is evident that this contemporary movement, while perhaps not solely responsible for shifts in personal or political identities, provides a means of discussing broader social issues. Further, Kaitlyn draws a specific connection between so-called "bad apples" and "bad people" who need "better training" and the assumptions that people make in dating. Here, she speaks to the ways that biases make their way into how people negotiate their interactions even in romantic encounters, noting that gut reactions can lead to people

"swiping left" – a reference to the dating app *Tinder*'s mode of rejection, wherein one "swipes" to the left side of the screen to dismiss the profile of someone deemed unattractive – or in the case of police, assume that someone acting erratically is on drugs. Kaitlyn consistently expressed an irritation with men over the course of our interview, whether in discussing how much she detested her sister's husband or how annoying men could be when the messaged her on *OkCupid* to comment on her physical appearance or leered at her in public places. In her words, they are "pieces of shit." Early in the interview, when I asked Kaitlyn what was appealing about online dating, she deadpanned, "Better screening." When I asked her to elaborate, she continued:

> Case in point, you go to the bar and you deal with 21-something, completely plastered drunkards. …I don't have to face them in person. And you get a better idea what the person is based off their grammar usage. 'Cause there is so much I can tolerate from people using the app versus a computer.

Kaitlyn expressed her disdain for men that do not live up to her standards by reiterating throughout our interview her concerns around grammar in *OkCupid* messages and phone text messages. She would associate so-called bad grammar with level of education but also with the level of seriousness the prospective date in question might have in terms of dating. She was very adamant that while she certainly enjoyed sex and wanted to be found attractive, she also did not want to be ogled by men she deemed unworthy. In fact, Kaitlyn took great pleasure in pulling up a lengthy message from a man who had messaged her in order to demonstrate how she did not want to be approached, hoping that I would present the entire message word for word and hopefully embarrass this man and men like him who sent similar messages. In this way, there were a number of

interconnecting parts that informed how Kaitlyn – like the other women I interviewed – navigates her dating process. Though she describes using things like grammar as a primary strategy for weeding out possible suitors, she also clearly understands that there are connections between the broader racial and gendered issues of society and the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. As she states so astutely, "people make assumptions." Interestingly though, she was resistant toward recognizing her own white privilege, opting to instead to argue that all women are treated poorly, even white women are assumed to be a little bit more pure than other women. Unlike the women who discussed their experiences of consistently being recognized as non-white, Kaitlyn and other white-appearing women – like Nicole – concerned themselves with issues relating to gender inequality and the gendered assumptions that men make about women based on their appearance. For example, Nicole was keen to note the ways in which her most recent boyfriend body-shamed her for her curvier frame; she was much more animated about her intention to resist a partner pressuring her into maintaining a super fit body than few other topics we discussed. These assumptions are what I find to be the running thread between the variety of vetting strategies that the multiracial and multiethnic women I interviewed employ. All of these women believe they can know something about how they will be treated, about a potential partner's race, gender, class, or sexual politics, or whether the person is simply not a person worth dating long-term.

Conclusion: Why Do Vetting Strategies Matter?

This chapter illustrates some of the ways that multiracial and multiethnic women rely upon discussions of incidences of racism, police brutality, or Islamophobia to not only articulate their own feelings on the current state of race in America, but also to strategically determine whether someone is worth dating or not. Vetting becomes a fraught aspect of a woman's dating toolkit, as the women I interviewed harbored a great deal of stress over how their stances would be perceived and whether they were perhaps being too harsh. Because vetting is comprised of a number of approaches, including actively listening for red flags or certain cues that clue one in to a possible partner's thinking on race, sex, and gender or bringing up specific cultural touchstones to force a person to articulate their views, it is extremely political and often requires an adeptness around language, as well as an ability to perform neutrality in order to maintain attractiveness. The widespread use of specific language related to the Black Lives Matter movement, the movement's opposition, and several other salient political issues – with discussions of the "racial climate", which lives "matter" or "cops versus people" – it appears that there is a racial grammar that shapes how the women I interviewed see (or do not see) race in everyday life, as well as how important these perceptions are to them in terms of dating. Though some women mentioned the movement directly, many women talked around it. Therefore, this racial grammar is key to how vetting strategies are implemented and understood.

The fact that some women, particularly the women who identified as being mixed with black or Arab, use the discourses around racial incidents and the incidents

themselves to get to know more about their potential dating partners illustrates the significant ways in which the "invisible weight of whiteness" (Bonilla-Silva 2012) is unequally borne. I find that engaging in conversations on these topics or performing neutrality in order to parse out political positions is strategic labor that is most commonly used by browner-skinned multiracial women. This illustrates the continued burden that blackness and brown-ness can place upon people to not only provide solutions to racial problems, but to be concerned with them in the first place. Overwhelmingly, I found that multiracial and multiethnic women who did not describe experiencing the ability to pass into whiteness uninhibited possess more significant awareness of the ways in which their skin color – and subsequently, their race – enables a more critical and nuanced assessment of whiteness and issues of race in the United States.

The fact that many white-passing respondents were content to say that they cared about "diversity" in the abstract and rarely, if ever, described pushing their dating partners or other people in their lives to questions their stances on race exemplifies the "erotic" nature of racism (Holland 2012) and how vicious logics of the "racial" infiltrate the relationships that could have some potential for achieving social change. The social change I allude to here is not one rooted in post-racial narratives of inherently progressive mixed-race people and families but rather that close relationships can be the places where people can develop a comfort in challenging a variety of social norms. As scholars have seen with queer women of color and the creation of new families (Acosta 2013; Moore 2011), social support goes a long way in facilitating lives outside of restrictive social norms. Further, considering that racial grammars and frames are transmitted through

social interaction, are romantic relationships not a place to challenge or, perhaps, rework them? For instance, several of white-appearing women discussed dating men who were blatantly anti-black – with some of these men even confidently calling themselves racists – for years. There was no breaking up with these men or challenging them on their racist beliefs; for these white-appearing women, the "deal-breaker" was less about how these men thought about race and more about how they placed certain traditional gender expectations on the relationship. How is it possible for race to "not matter" to these women in terms of who they choose as their partners and yet, several women ignored the ways in which it clearly mattered to their partners? That any women, but especially the post-racial harbingers known as mixed-race women, would continue dating racist men because "it's just their opinion" or "they have good reason" is concerning for several reasons, namely for how it illuminates how average people are possibly responding to racial matters more broadly and to Black Lives Matter, Islamophobic and anti-immigrant sentiments, and the current political moment under a viciously bigoted White House more specifically.

As this chapter illustrates, the implementation of certain racial rhetoric and logics as part of the vetting practices enacted during the dating process suggests that race continues to play a significant role even after relationships have formed and become more serious. There are stark discrepancies in the experiences of mixed-race women who are darker skinned compared to their lighter-skinned peers in terms of having to manage racial discrimination and to preemptively select partners who hopefully do not harbor incompatible racial politics. Appearance heavily impacts how mixed-race women use the

specific ways of listening to, and prompting, potential partners on dates to determine their politics. Women who are mixed with black are more likely to directly ask questions about "current events" and then reference issues related to the Black Lives Matter movement and instances of police brutality (such as the death of Sandra Bland in Prairie View, Texas, the young teen girl who was body slammed by an officer outside of a pool party in a suburb of Dallas, Texas, or the shooting of nine churchgoers in Charleston, South Carolina by avowed white supremacist Dylann Roof). Women who have Arab or Middle Eastern backgrounds would also try to screen for Islamophobia in these ways.

Though several scholars (DaCosta 2007; Dalmage 2000; Rockquemore et al. 2006; Root 1990, 1992) discuss the variation in how mixed-race families try to account for how a mixed-race child may be viewed by broader society, research is still limited in how the identities that emerge as a result of appearance and cultural socialization have impacts on the ways that mixed-race adults navigate relationships. Further, racework (Steinbugler 2012) continues to be a concept that is discussed in relation to how non-multiracial people deal with the discrimination their partners or children cope with. Few studies have explored how mixed-race people themselves may engage in this work, whether as an extension of the racial literacy (Twine 2010) possibly engendered by their parents or in terms of the negotiation of spaces, emotional labor, and contending with certain kinds of visibility that Ann Steinbugler describes as so pertinent to how race is worked through in black-white interracial relationships. The fact that the mulitracial women invested in anti-racism or women who are mixed with hyper-visible marginalized racial and ethnic groups are who I found to be the primary users of these vetting

strategies provides evidence of the diversity in the experiences of multiracial people when it comes to navigating racial and ethnic identity in everyday life, as well as in how labor related to identity falls on some bodies more than others. In the next chapter, I further unpack these varied experiences, focusing on the narrative frames that multiracial and multiethnic women use to determine racial boundaries within their relationships and illustrating the significance of skin color, cultural practices, and family ties in negotiating race as part of one's relationship.

CHAPTER 5

COLOR, CULTURE, OR COUSIN?: FRAMING BOUNDARIES IN INTERRACIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Introduction

Over the last two decades, the percentage of interracial and interethnic couplings have increased in the United States, with 10 percent of opposite-sex married couples having partners of what the Census terms "different race or Hispanic origin" in 2010, compared with 18 percent of opposite-sex unmarried partners and 21 percent of same-sex unmarried partners (U.S. Census Bureau 2012). Additionally, the American Community Survey estimated that 8.4 percent of all current U.S. (heterosexual) marriages were interracial; these numbers are up from 1980, where only 3.2 percent of all (heterosexual) marriages were interracial (The Associated Press 2012). With the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision in support of same-sex marriage – *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) – these statistics will likely shift the findings of future studies of interracial marriage.

Historically, there has been little occasion to question – at least as a researcher – what "counts" as an interracial relationship. The logic that the broader public and those in academe in the United States have operated from stems from legal definitions, primarily related to chattel slavery, the Reconstruction era, and the subsequent anti-miscegenation laws that characterized Jim Crow policy. While definitions of race in the United States have shifted over time, those who comprise interracial relationships depend on how people may identify with (or are identified as) different racial and/or ethnic categories.

These legal definitions often fail in their attempts to measure relationships that account for populations who are racialized outside of mainstream categories (such as Arab and other Middle Eastern peoples); for many people, and for much of the academic literature on interracial relationships (see Chapter 1), black and white couplings and, generally, any couples that include a white partner, are where attention is focused. In fact, many Americans tout the *Loving v. Virginia* (1967) U.S. Supreme Court decision as the penultimate triumph over the discrimination faced by those in interracial couplings[7].

Yet, social scientists often do not discuss what it means to be in an interracial relationship outside of the logics of legality or state-sanctioned and institutionally measured categories of "race." For instance, some researchers exclude Hispanics and Latino/as in their studies due to the Census Bureau (and other data collection entities) framing Hispanic and Latin origin as ethnicity rather than as a racial group. The practice of categorizing Hispanic/Latino/a has come under fierce debate (Miyawaki 2016; Rodríguez et al. 2013), with the Census taking steps to possibly reframe this question on the 2020 Census (Miyawaki 2016). Because many Hispanics and Latino/as consistently describe being racialized in their day-to-day lives (Harris and Sim 2002), especially amidst a political and social climate that makes immigration an almost exclusively "brown" Hispanic problem, many researchers include Hispanics and Latino/as as part of

[7] Mildred (a black and Native American woman) and Richard Loving (a white man) married in Washington, D.C. in 1958 in order to evade Virginia's *Racial Integrity Act of 1924* that prohibited marriage between whites and non-whites. The couple eventually was forced to serve time in prison for their marriage. The landmark Supreme Court decision in the *Loving v. Virginia* case determined that anti-miscegenation laws are unconstitutional and ended all race-based legal restrictions on marriage in the United States. The Lovings have been the subject of songs, films, and have their legal triumph celebrated annual with the "Loving Day" holiday on June 12th. This case was also cited as precedent in cases that pushed for legalizing same-sex marriage, including *Obergefell v. Hodges*.

the multiracial populations, and interracial couples and families that they study (DaCosta 2007; Feliciano 2016; Hochschild et al. 2012; Root 2001). This adds an added layer of complexity when trying to understand so-called interracial relationships or mixed-race families, as there are significant and meaningful differences between the life experiences of white Hispanics and Latino/as and more "brown" Hispanics and Latino/as, particularly those with more recent African and indigenous ancestries (Kramer et al. 2015; Miyawaki 2016; Sims 2016). Further, the addition of a logic of *mestizaje*, wherein "everyone" is of mixed racial descent, contributes to an eliding of how many Hispanics and Latino/as residing in the United States benefit from some white privilege. Similar concerns exist for how to account for the racial experiences of people of Arab and Middle Eastern descent.

Though sociologists are always learning more about the struggles that interracial couples and families face – from experiencing racism (Frankenberg 1993; Nemoto 2009; Steinbugler 2012) to coping with and navigating neighborhood segregation (Bratter 1998; DaCosta 2007; Hou et al. 2015; Wright et al. 2003) to intrafamilial dynamics around race, gender, and power (Bratter and King 2008; Hordge-Freeman 2015) – there remains a lack of research as to *why* certain relationships count as interracial and others do not and what implications these definitions may have for understandings of racial identity and racial boundary-making in the United States. Further, there are few studies that explore this question for the so-called products of interracial unions: mixed-race people. As Courtney Bonam and Margaret Shih (2009) note, multiracial individuals can have different race-related experiences compared to monoracial individuals, therefore influencing their comfort with interracial relationships (p. 96). In fact, the researchers

suggest that multiracial people may define interracial relationships in such a way that undermines research that argues that interracial relationships are less intimate and less frequent overall than relationships between people of the same ethnic/racial background (Sigelman, et al. 1996; Welch et al. 2001). Several studies have suggested that interracial couples have higher rates of divorce than marriages between people of the same racial background (The Associated Press 2012; Bratter and King 2008), with black-white couples and Hispanic-white couples considered the least stable. Further, Bonam and Shih (2009) note that while they asked mixed-race participants about their comfort in forming a relationship with "someone of a different race," they have no information about how different race is being defined nor do they know if the definitions of different race that these participants may have lines up with societal demarcations of different race (p. 98) which, as discussed earlier, tends to fall along legally-defined or state-determined lines. In addition, several scholars argue that multiracial people experience greater success in dating, particularly within online spaces (Curington et al. 2015; Feliciano 2016; McGrath et al. 2016; Petersen 2014; Rudder 2014). Yet, even these studies have their limitations as they are reading "success" as likelihood of responses to messages or profile ratings, rather than the quantity or quality of dates that people go on. This language of success remains limited in its ability to reflect the reality of any person's romantic experiences, let alone those of people of color, as receiving high numbers of messages or having high ratings online has no documented correlation to better dating outcomes considering that researchers often have no access to the content of these messages. By touting "success" in dating, the literature promotes exchange logics that privilege certain embodiments over

others. For those of mixed-race backgrounds, the exchange of social position is not clear cut only further illustrating the problematic nature of this theoretical trajectory. Overall, the studies mentioned above fail to illuminate how multiracial people may perceive their potential partners, nor how these partners may perceive them.

It is with these questions in mind that I ask: a) how are multiracial women defining what counts as an interracial relationship? and b) how do they come their definitions? I find that multiracial women utilize three narrative/ideological frames to distinguish what is and what is not an interracial relationship: first, that skin "color" matters, in the sense that partners in a given relationship have different appearances; second, that "culture" matters, particularly for those who can pass as white and want to make distinctions between themselves and white people they may date; and lastly, familiarity, most often invoked as "he reminded me too much of my cousin" or some other male family member. For this last frame in particular, women use notions of familial closeness as a means of determining who they will not date, as that familiarity is perceived as undesirable. Alongside wider discourses around shifting population demographics in the United States, there is a lot of conversation about interracial couples – in particular, heterosexual couples. Social scientists have spent the last several decades asking how much "crossing the color line" may signal social progress (for example, see Qian & Lichter 2001, 2011; Root 2001; Yancey 2002). Some theorize that increased intimacy between people of different races will break down social barriers rooted in racial inequality, while others illustrate how interracial relationships in and of themselves are not progressive at all (Dalmage 2000; Frankenberg 1993; Hordge-Freeman 2015;

Steinbugler 2012; Twine 2010). Related arguments have been made regarding marriages that cross class lines, with the hope that relationships that refrain from isolating wealth and other economic resources among those of higher classes would result in a more equitable division of resources (Streib 2015). Despite the increases in interracial relationships, several race scholars (Frankenberg 1993; DaCosta 2007; Sexton 2008) argue that interracial relationships (and, subsequently, multiracial people) fail to achieve social progress due to the ways in which they uphold the logic of colorblindness, the ideology that relies upon the notion that race no longer matters for people's opportunities.

There is a long legacy of social scientists using sexual and romantic relationships as a means to understand shifts in identity and power in the modern social world, particularly in what Anthony Giddens (1992) termed the "transformation of intimacy," the so-called radicalizing possibilities of relationships that consist of sexual and emotional equality. For Giddens, achievement of this "pure" relationship is closely tied to the democratization of society; in his view, democratization of society will facilitate democratization of intimate relationships and vice versa. Giddens, however, is not alone in his focus on intimate pairings as a means of analyzing social shifts. In *Talk of Love* (2001), Ann Swidler illustrates how the "culture of love" has material impacts on how people formulate their views of what it is to *be* in love, even as people often reject or distance themselves from the common cultural images of love. For Swidler, the notion of "love" and how it is symbolized comprises part of a "cultural tool kit" that helps us to understand the links between cultural meanings and social action. Further, Zygmunt Bauman (2003) attests to the "liquid" nature of modern relationships, where social ties

have become loose and people shift between social positions and relationships with less commitment. However, many of these scholars exploring the transformative potential of intimate relationships ignore the role of race, opting to theorize around default white, upwardly mobile, heterosexual populations in the West. Further, most of these theories do not account for what Aziz Ansari and Eric Klinenberg (2015) frame as an online "revolution" in their recent best seller, *Modern Romance*.[8] Yet, even with their acknowledgment of the role of technology, Ansari and Klinenberg fail to make any meaningful assessment of race, with their meager attempt doing more to reinforce problematic racial stereotypes. The only chapter of their book that even attempts to engage a discussion of race or ethnicity problematically frames Japanese men as sexually-repressed "herbivores" in contrast to the sexually-aggressive "rib-eye eating maniacs" of Argentina (pp. 149-176). The centering of whiteness in the study of intimacy tends to only be undone when discussing interdating or intermarriage, and even then, nearly every study focuses on couples where at least one partner identifies as white.

This is relevant due to race playing a significant role in the experiences people have in their romantic and sexual lives. Being perceived as attractive is raced and gendered, influenced by stereotypes about what a person will bring to a relationship, especially in regards to sex (Joyner and Gao 2005; Nemoto 2009). Various studies have shown that people discriminate against those considered the least racially and sexually desirable and more recent findings consistently show that black women and Asian men

[8] It should be noted that Aziz Ansari is not a sociologist but rather a comedian who partnered with sociologist Eric Klinenberg for this book. Some of the content for the book stems from some of Ansari's stand-up comedy show material.

are the least likely to be messaged or have their messages returned on online dating websites (Lin and Lundquist 2013; Robinson 2015; Robnett and Feliciano 2011). While more researchers have been able to study racism in dating thanks to the internet, this discrimination is not exclusive to online spaces – even as dating websites have replaced many traditional places to find romantic partners (Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012). As already noted, little of the existing research of dating, marriage, or other intimate relationships *intentionally* includes the experiences of multiracial people or attempts to understand the ways that racial boundaries may be differently constructed within these intimate settings.

For instance, the women that I interviewed consistently described their race (and in particular, their mixedness) as a characteristic that male potential partners often comment on. In a text message conversation that a respondent shared with me, there is an illustration of this. The male suitor says, "You are quite a remix, I like that" to which the woman responds "LOL [laugh out loud] what?" The male suitor replies, "Mixed backgrounds are always better lol" and shortly after, "so, if you make babies with me (imagine for a second), that baby would cover almost all of the ethnicities there are…except Asian I guess." Another respondent showed me an exchange in her *OkCupid* messages where a man attempted to initiate a conversation by stating, "To be honest I am fascinated by the hybrid black/Hispanic type." Yet another man questioned a woman over *OkCupid* with, "What ethnicity are you?" When she responded that her mom was white and her dad was black, he seemed disappointed, stating, "Oh ok. Dad just plain ole black nothing fancy? If that's a weird question sorry lol I always end up attracting the exotic

mixed girls." The examples of men commenting on multiracial and multiethnic women's appearances or asking them "what" they are is extensive not only in my research, but also in countless other mixed-race studies projects. This perceived racial ambiguity is a linking experience across many multiracial people's lives (DaCosta 2007; Sims 2016); however, the question being asked in romantic contexts can take on additional meanings. Asking "what" someone is a means of aiding in categorization within understood racial hierarchy. The desire to know "what" a potential romantic partner is provides a way to understand how a given relationship might play out. The few exchanges I share here illustrate the ways that race makes its way into flirting practices and the early stages of relationships where people are trying to get to know each other better, facilitated by online dating platforms and text messaging. As other studies can attest (Feliciano 2016; Lin and Lundquist 2013; McGrath et al. 2016, etc.), race – in the form of individual racial identities and perceived race – plays a significant role in dating interactions. However, in this chapter, I focus on two questions: First, do mixed-race women invoke logics of colorblindness when discussing relationships? And secondly, how are mixed-race women defining what counts as an interracial relationship? First, I will look at how women invoke the notion of colorblindness by saying that they have "no preferences" in terms of which men they will date. Then, I provide evidence of the three narrative frames that multiracial and multiethnic women use to draw racial boundaries in their relationships. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of these findings.

Unpacking "No Preference": The Invoking of Colorblindness

Virtually all 30 women I interviewed at some point informed me that race is not important when deciding whether to date someone. One of the singular exceptions was Anita, a 30 year-old who identified as black and Afro-Mexican. Dark-brown skinned with a tall frame only made taller by her medium-sized natural afro tied up in a scarf, Anita embodied mixedness in a way that mainstream media depictions and various stereotypes do not acknowledge; the richness of her complexion was enhanced by the pale pink dress she wore to meet me over coffee. When describing her experiences, she expressed that her rejection of white men was because she was "sick of their racism." However, even she noted that this decision was recent, as she had dated several white men since separating from her husband, who Anita told me was black. She generally still believed that race should not matter when it came to dating. Even with this exception, over and over I was told that "race doesn't matter" or that the women I spoke with had "no preference." However, it was not long before these women contradicted themselves and either explained how race did in fact matter or that they illustrated their preferences through the men they had already dated – by providing me with extensive dating histories – and who they showed me on their *OkCupid* accounts. Marie (an Arab and white 26-year-old first introduced in Chapter 3) is illustrative of this tendency. When I asked her what kinds of things she considered when deciding whether to date someone she stated:

> I'm really, like, open about that. I don't have so much of a preference. I do like dark-colored eyes. …That's pretty much my only preference. But if they don't have that – probably a lot of people think of themselves that way but I don't really judge people on looks.

However, like many other women I interviewed, Marie almost immediately went back on her assertion that race did not matter. After some follow up questions, she revealed that race was somewhat important to her:

> Like if it came down to a decision between two guys who were exactly the same except for one of them was Arab and one of them was like a white guy, I don't know, then would be very conflicted. 'Cause I feel like at least with those two, those two ethnic groups- I would feel like I was making a choice of what I am gonna be.

Here, Marie makes it clear that race matters for her because the race of the person she dates reflects back on her own racial identity and who she will "choose" to be. Kimberly DaCosta (2007) notes that the choice of romantic partner(s) is perceived as a "sign" of not only how a multiracial person feels about their parents, but about racial or ethnic groups. She argues that the race of a romantic partner allows others to gauge "identification and commitment" not only of the individual in the relationship, but perhaps any future children (p. 132). This "symbolic work" of marking oneself as multiracial and having others recognize that identity is what DaCosta suggests is central to a mixed-race experience. When Marie says her choice of partner also marks her choice of identity, it reflects a concern over how she should properly navigate her identity. Further, how someone chooses to identify is influenced by their upbringing and the cultural worlds they have access to through familial socialization (see Rockquemore et al. 2006); selection of partners may prove to be a way of affirming certain cultural practices or value systems. For instance, Calla (a Black and Mexican 36-year-old first introduced in Chapter 4) share specific feelings about who she would date:

> I felt like if I couldn't identify with – I feel like at one point I felt that if I dated a Hispanic man, then I was going to be immersed in this culture that I wasn't fully part of either and then also on the other side [black] I felt that way, too. So, I felt like I would be picking a side. And I've had a couple of experiences with that, um, that I could share. I felt like sometimes, it was just easier to just date somebody who I didn't have anything in common with and just see if we could find common ground. Without any kind of, "this is how you should behave, this is how you should be."

It is interesting that Calla suggests that she is not fully Hispanic considering that she is closest to her Hispanic family members (her mother's side). In fact, her pride in the fact that her mother did not draw distinctions between her and her half-siblings (all of whom are not mixed-race but are "full" Hispanic) implied that she was very comfortable around Hispanics and Latinos and was invested in those cultural ties. Her comments about not feeling fully black were less surprising, though, due to the fact that her father was not a present figure in her life and he seemed to shun her in favor of his new family. Further, Calla described incidences growing up where other black girls picked on her, making her feel that something was wrong with her. So, her reticence to date someone who shares one of her racial and ethnic identities seems to lie in a desire to not be stereotyped and to "not constantly be thinking about race." After sharing a story about a black man who hit on her at a bar by telling her, "Girl, we need to get you in touch with your black side!" Calla stated that she has a "problem with people trying to put me in a category or trying to make me be this or be that. I'm a sum of all of my parts." This sentiment, coupled with her retort to the man at the bar – she replied, "I thank you for your concern, if my dad wanted me to be in touch with my black side, maybe he would have stuck his black ass around." – indicates an explicit effort to not be racialized as "just" black. Though Calla

says that race is "losing its importance" when it comes to dating, the fact that she could name several ways in which it was important further illustrates the inconsistencies among the women I interviewed.

Along these same lines, India, a 24-year-old who identified as black and Asian, started off framing her responses with language that indicated that the race of a potential partner does not matter to her. India stated that her medium-brown skinned appearance and "bigger" body-type often led people to assume she is "just" black or on some occasions, that she is Samoan. With her blonde-dyed hair tied up into a topknot bun, emphasizing her dark, natural roots, I was unsure of how long her hair was. However, she noted that many people fetishized her long curly hair, asking to touch it or even lie in it. When I asked about her dating preferences, India seemed confused and unsure:

> If we're being honest, not really…the profiles that I like, it's usually all types of men. I mean, the men that I've been – that I've liked on a real level in the past have mostly been white. Um it's just something as I've gotten older I'm comfortable with 'cause it's like oh, am I really attracted to white men? No, no, no – I do think I'm sexually attracted to all races but I don't know, all my friends just happen to be white.

Initially, India says she is interested in all types of men. Yet, all of the men she has liked on a "real" level – meaning those who are worth dating seriously – have been white. She states that she is comfortable with this but considering how much she switched back and forth, she does not seem very comfortable. Like the other women I interviewed, she took care to define very specific characteristics she liked about men other than race – a sense of humor, being artsy, and having what she called a "dad bod." However, when I asked explicitly about race, she became unsure and in some ways, ashamed about her apparent

preferences. While white men are people she likes on a "real" level, men of color are people she is sexually attracted to. This distinction is concerning, as it implies that all men can be sexually attractive but white men seem to have particular characteristics that make them worth dating. Certainly, India's desires may be a result of shared interests and other commonalities; however, men of color are just as capable of sharing her interests.

Across my interviews, women talked mostly about dating white men, a finding that supports the colorblind logic that women used to describe their preferences. This preference for white masculinity certainly has its roots in a Hollywood-driven media culture that positions white men as the ultimate ideal. For example, Hernán Vera and Andrew Gordon (2003) describe the overrepresentation of the "white messiah" in American film, typically a handsome and brave white male figure whose charisma and inherent goodness allow him to triumph over some evil threat (pp. 114-116). Increasingly, these messiah film characters are accompanied by people of color whom the messiah leads to freedom or in overcoming some burden (p. 116-123). Relatedly, films representing interracial relationships often place white men in the role of romantic interest, contrasting with portrayals of women of color as hypersexual and in need of saving from themselves as shown in the documentary, *Slaying the Dragon* (Gee 1988), where Asian women are presented as exotic, beautiful, and accepting.

Cultural repertoires (Swidler 2001) – the variety of cultural symbols, rules, and rituals that people draw on to form their cultural toolkits – shape the scripts that people employ to participate and "do" culture. The films that feature white men as saviors and as idealized romantic interests are prominent in informing these toolkits and defining which

people are desirable in the United States. As Vera and Gordon (2003) argue, "movies do not merely mimic reality; they also invent new ways of acting, feeling, and thinking" (113). Ann Swidler's (2001) analysis of how white heterosexual couples rely on cultural themes to frame the way that they talk about love and marriage notes that multiple parts of a repertoire can be mobilized at one time (pp. 25-34) and they are drawn from broader society. Considering that colorblindness is not just an ideological position, but also a style in which one speaks and engages the world (Bonilla-Silva 2013, pp. 101-119), it should not be surprising that anyone living in an ideologically "colorblind" society would have their thinking about romantic relationships influenced. In saying that race does not matter, the multiracial and multiethnic women I interviewed sound eerily similar to Bonilla-Silva's respondents who say that "anything but race" is of central concern to the issue at hand, whether that be in regards to segregated neighborhoods or interracial marriage (pp. 110-111). Further, the notion that race does not matter is at the heart of the multiracialist movement, where interracial couples and mixed families are touted as being representative of a move away from race being important, invoking a phrase such as "love sees no color" (Ibrahim 2012; Sexton 2008). Yet, there is a plethora of evidence that love does in fact, see color, and that only some populations have access to crossing racial lines (see Chapter 2). As Michael Miyawaki (2016) suggests, some self-identified multiracial groups (black/whites, American Indian/whites, and Asian/whites) have a greater likelihood of being married to whites, perhaps signifying that mixed-white multiracials may be in the process of assimilating into whiteness. Based on the narratives the women I interviewed presented me, race seemingly can be something that "does not

matter" because the men these women are dating appear to be more likely to *not* be men of color. This apparent preference for white men is important for how mixed-race women frame their understandings of interracial relationships.

Defining Interracial Relationships through Narrative/Ideological Frames

In this section, I provide evidence for the three narrative/ideological frames that the women I interviewed use to explain their understandings of interracial relationships to me, giving me some insight into their thinking about who makes an acceptable partner and who does not. The three frames in this section also form the title of this chapter: "color," referring to partners in a given relationship having different physical appearances; "culture," referring to ways to make distinctions between oneself and white people one may date; and lastly, "cousin" or what I refer to here as undesirable familiarity, referring to the unattractiveness of potential partners that may remind a woman of some male family member.

Frame One: Skin "Color" Matters

The first frame revolves around racial identity and appearance, arguing that skin "color" matters in the sense that partners in a given relationship have different physical appearances. For nearly all of the women I interviewed, "we're different races" or "we look different" were the core reasons why relationships were considered interracial. Though some women discussed not "seeing" color in the context of their relationship, they would admit that other people – outsiders – would have certain perceptions. Women

who talked about being mistaken for white described dealing with "the stares" or the "the looks" (see Bhattacharyya 1998, Sehadri-Crooks 2000) from other people when they were out with a black or darker-skinned man, while not raising any eyebrows when out with a white man or a man who looked similar to them. As Kalpana Sehadri-Crooks (2000) argues, race is a "regime of looking" wherein race cannot be "reduced to the look" (2). Thus, where race can be visibilized, particularly as being "of color" in opposition to whiteness, people contend with how they perceive their partners and how others perceive the couple (or family). Sehadri-Crooks notes that this visibility of "heritage" becomes marked on the body via major and minor details that do not necessarily require a consistency of appearance. As some respondents noted in their interviews, their racial appearance shifts depending on whom they are with, whether they have a tan, or, as their hairstyling practices changes. Jennifer Sims (2016) terms this "consistent inconsistent racial perception" noting that the internalization of a racial identity based on external perception assumes that people are consistently perceived in the same way. According to Sims, being inconsistently racially categorized by others consistently over time actually aids in the development of some multiracial people's identities, especially identities that are not rooted in single race categories (pp. 580-581). Additionally, Rory Kramer and colleagues (2015) argue that this identity inconsistency can lead to benefits for multiracial people, especially if they gain access to white privilege (p. 277). This variability in experiences and the power of perception is important to note when discussing how women view themselves within relationships. For instance, Nicole (a Native American and white 28-year-old first introduced in Chapter 4) was very clear

about what makes a relationship interracial. When I asked what her understanding was based on, she replied:

> Well…it also sort of depends on your definition of racial, because sometimes, some people kind of interchange that with cultural and there is a very different culture to that, too. There's a different way that he grew up and different traditions that he has that I don't know about but I saw it as an interracial couple because of skin tone. For example, the guy I just got out of the serious relationship with, he's Romanian. Born in Romania, and I never considered us to be a multi – like an interracial couple. I guess because I consider his race to be white but his culture was different than mine.

Nicole notes that race – appearance – and culture – social practices and traditions – are different but often interchanged. It is this tendency that *OkCupid* exploits when it meshes ethnicity and race into one category on the profiles. While she notes that the cultural differences between her and her partners have been things that she noticed, Nicole makes it clear that having a different skin color from the person she is dating is at the core of what makes the relationship interracial, regardless of the ways in which race and culture get confused. Autumn, a 21 year-old who identifies as black and white, also discussed the salience of skin color but focused more on external assumptions:

> But I would say, I would perceive any relationship that I was in as interracial but I would say other people, if they saw me dating a black person, they wouldn't think it was interracial. Like obviously, if you see me with a white person, that's probably the thing where people are just like that – they're like, "That's different. You don't see that a lot."

Though Autumn had stated that she saw all relationships she could be in as interracial – even possibly with another black and white mixed-race person – she made this assertion based on the fact that she, herself, is multiracial (what she sometimes referred to in her interview as "interracial"). A college-basketball player, Autumn is tall and slender; her

fair skin, small, thin nose, full lips, and spiral curls weighed down with product give her an almost stereotypical "racially ambiguous" appearance. She noted that she used so much conditioner in order to have a "good hair day" and avoid "looking like a lion." As we talked, I wondered what impact her participation in a racialized sport like basketball had on the ways that other people perceived her. When I asked her to explain why people would not see her and a black person as an interracial relationship, she responded that it was "mainly because of the one drop rule." She further stated: "I look black, I must be black, of course she's dating a black person. They just think it's normal." Autumn went on to draw distinctions between what people think within their own relationships and what people think of the relationship from the outside. This is comparable to the ways that racial identities themselves are formed (Harris and Sim 2002; Kramer et al. 2015; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2008; Sims 2016), as it depends on both internal and external categorization.

Skin tone as a marker was especially significant for those women who described being consistently perceived as women of color, especially those where mixed with Black. For instance, India had an assortment of responses to my questions about what counts as an interracial relationship due to the fact that her initial thinking seemed to be based on racial identity and appearance but then shifted after we talked about it longer. When I first asked, India said, "I mean, I guess if I were dating a black man or an Asian man I probably wouldn't consider it interracial. I mean, I guess it is, yeah." Here, India immediately refers to a racial identity marker, noting that because she is black and Asian, dating either a black or Asian man would not count as interracial in her mind. She stood

her ground on this when I asked about white men, stating, "I mean, just 'cause I'm not white and he's not black or Asian." The boundaries India draws are seemingly quite simple, which seems rooted in the fact that she has a medium-brown skin tone and only gets darker skinned when she tans. I continued to ask her more questions, inquiring about where other men would fit within her thinking:

> You know, like, I think this is the first time I've really thought about it. I think off the bat I wouldn't think of that as interracial because we're both people of color but I mean, technically, yeah, I mean, I'm not a Latina.
>
> I guess since we're both people of color so we're both kind of coming from like a sense of feeling like the other, where you know, we have like distinct cultures that are like you know, just "inside of us." [laughs] Um, I don't know, I guess because we're both kind of operating from like a similar framework of being like… oppressed by white people so we understand like certain fundamental issues that like you wouldn't get in a relationship with a white person. So, I guess that's why I'm kind of like, "Yeah it's interracial" but – I don't know, I guess that's like a little of comfort, that's just like there's things that you don't really have to like discuss. They're experiencing the same types of things.

In these longer statements, India starts to position herself as being in an interracial relationship or not based on some shared experience of the world as a person of color. She creates a binary between those who are white and those who are non-white, with skin color being part of it but mostly a sense of being culturally different both in the sense of cultural practices but also in terms of experiences of systematic discrimination within the United States. Her note about distinct cultures "inside" was a nod to an earlier part of the interview where she reflected on how white people would be so excited to hear that she was multiracial, telling her that she was so "cool" for having all these different cultures "inside" her. India's understanding of her and other people of color's difference is based on white people framing her and others as racially and culturally different and to an

extent, as more interesting. As she and I spoke further, she provided more details about what would impact her ability to view a relationship as interracial or not:

> I think initially, when I was thinking like how would I perceive that, and I automatically was thinking like well, if I dated a black man, I wouldn't feel like that's an interracial relationship. But if I was dating like an Asian man, I would – like an East Asian man – like maybe that would be interracial because you can like see, I don't know, we're like two different skin tones, we don't look alike. Even though we're both like coming from similar backgrounds. So yeah, I did have that initial reaction like… [pauses] but yeah, no, I do get that like if there's like uh you know, we both look alike like on a phenotypic level like then it's not interracial. But I don't know, it's a lot. [laughs]

The distinctions that India draws between herself and East Asian men in particular is important, considering that she knows that cultural differences could be present. I would argue that India tiptoes so carefully around making these distinctions because her father is Filipino and Chinese, meaning that she likely understands herself as both East Asian and South Asian. Because there tend to be noticeable phenotypic differences between East Asians and South Asians, especially when it comes to skin tone, when India imagines that she and another Asian person are going to look different, she is acknowledging that another South Asian person might not look so different from her. India is a clear example of the ways in which browner-skinned women were always acutely aware of their skin color in ways that more fair skinned women were not, as well as an example of how these narrative frames can co-exist together. It is telling that for women who were more light-skinned, skin color difference was dependent upon their male partners being darker skinned; otherwise, they would employ other logics to draw lines of difference.

In line with findings from Bonam and Shih's (2009) study, several women determined that all relationships would be interracial unless the partner was the same racial combination. A smaller number of women framed interracial relationships as only occurring with white people, as a relationship with another person of color would be two people of color together. I argue that much of the back and forth women have over what is or is not interracial is rooted in the moments of racial (mis)identification that are par for the course for many mixed-race people, most especially if their phenotype does not match up with what others expect a certain race to "look" like (Rockquemore and Brunsma 2008). With Nicole, skin color was not just significant as a way for her to make designations between herself and her partners but also as a way that her partners could make comments about her skin tone. The latter only tended to happen with the black men that Nicole had dated in college who had nicknamed her things like "Snow White" based on her fair skin and dark hair. So, this illustrates the ways that skin tone plays a role not just in women using it as a way to say "this is an interracial relationship" but also the ways that race gets reified by the ways that the people these women are in relationships *with* make light, essentially, of their own skin color(s). For instance, Kai (introduced in Chapter 4) was called a "mocha princess" by her white male partner; skin color, then, becomes a way of *identifying* difference both in the ways that the women I interviewed used it to frame their relationships *and* also how other people reflect it back onto these women.

Frame Two: "Culture" Matters

The second frame argues that "culture" matters. This frame strives to make distinctions between women and their partners despite having similar physical appearances. The notion of "culture" varied in terms of how much of a distinct difference women drew between culture and race. Often, "culture" was something that came from people of color and white dating partners were seen as either "lacking" in culture or having an incompatible culture. Lorena, a 31-year-old who identifies as both Chicana and Hispanic and white, noted the importance of her heritage and cultural background for making a relationship work. With her lighter skin tone, light brown eyes, and medium-brown hair pulled up into a bun under a Notre Dame visor, the first things I noticed about Lorena were her Birkenstock sandals and tee shirt with an image of a cat (inside of taco) printed on it. At one point in our conversation, she described going with an ex-boyfriend to Taos, New Mexico, so he could meet her family and in her words, "experience" where she is from. Following her story, she expressed her disappointment:

> I think there were some ways that the values that I…draw from my mom's side of the family culturally – are values that they just did not end up sharing. There was certainly cross – they were certainly intercultural. [laughs] But I don't know how…it's hard for me to disentangle what of that was racial and what of it was cultural and I'm still not really quite sure I know how to distinguish the two from other stuff.

Lorena stated that she was upset that her partner did not understand why someone would feel "connected to a place." She notes the importance of "values," particularly cultural practices in terms how one treats one's living space and other people in one's life, in addition to things like feeling connected to land where her ancestors had experienced

violence through colonization. She points out the ambiguity over what of this "difference" is racial and what of it is cultural, even as she remains confident that she and her ex-boyfriend were different in some concrete way. What is interesting here is that in the exchanges that just preceded this statement, Lorena had admitted that though she had only had serious relationships with white men she was not sure if she saw those relationships as interracial. Her hesitance to categorize her own relationships as interracial aside, Lorena *was* clear that her parents' marriage was interracial – despite her mother identifying as white. This hesitance was due to the fact that she has experienced shifts in her own identity, with her identity as Chicana becoming much stronger now in her thirties than in her teens or early twenties. So, the statements she makes about disentangling racial and cultural difference seem pretty heavily influenced by her current racial, ethnic, and political identity as a Chicana woman, speaking to the ways that drawing the lines of difference is an ever-changing practice.

Similarly, Kaitlyn (a white and Mexican 28-year-old first introduced in Chapter 4) made explicit distinctions when discussing her ex-boyfriends:

> They're white white. One was of Italian descent, one can trace his lineage back to the first settlers. It's just that – because I do have a lot of Hispanic friends and such, and it's just the way that, it seems to me, that a lot of the community differentiates. Like the skin color; I'd be considered more of a white Mexican but there's also Euro white and then you have medium darkness Hispanic, you've got Native, and then Black.

Aside from the ways that distinctions are made so cleanly between types of whiteness, what I find most interesting here is the way that colonialism is acknowledged via the "first settlers" comment yet indigeneity is not mentioned until Kaitlyn starts naming all

the skin color gradations. In this framing, Kaitlyn draws a line between herself – a so-called white Mexican – and her "white white" exes. While she admits that when walking down the street, no one would assume that she and a white man were different perhaps in appearance, to her, there was a clear cultural difference. In a lot of ways, distinctions being made along skin color and cultural lines may seem obvious. However, individual physical appearance and racial identity were central to how the women in my study utilized these frames. Overwhelmingly, the women I interviewed described having dated white men more than any other group. Yet, light-skinned women – especially those who described being mistaken for only white – were the predominant users of the "cultural" frame, particularly to draw differences between themselves and whom they referred to as "white dudes" and "gringo" whites. Gia (a Mexican and Lebanese 22-year-old first introduced in Chapter 3) was direct in stating that while she predominantly dated white guys and that strangers often assumed she was Anglo white, she did not identify as "white or Caucasian" herself. Because she does not "identify as the same racial or ethnic background as them and they don't as me", her relationships with these white men are interracial. She further elaborated:

> Even so, a lot of times too, like, like I said growing up has to do a lot with my ethnic identity. Like how I grew up and who I can relate to and when I talk about like my parents' expectations or like how whatever, I grew up, it's just so different from these guys.

Gia's ability to draw differences between herself and the white men she dates is not only dependent upon her understanding of her cultural background as different, but also the fact that her friends and family reaffirm these understandings:

> My friends always make fun of me and say "you're always with these big ol' white guys." Other random people in public don't see it that way because I look white and have fair skin. And even my family draws that difference as well, my mom she's very like strongly Hispanic and Middle Eastern, but mostly Hispanic because that's how she grew up. Strong Hispanic identity and she'll say, like if something one of my ex-boyfriends would do would upset me or if they would say something, you know, she'd be like "White people are just like that. White people, they say these things and they believe this and that."

Here, Gia's friends frame her romantic preferences for "big ol' white guys" as something funny, while she noted that the first time she had brought a white boyfriend home after graduating high school, her mother was excited, exclaiming "Oooooh, you brought a white guy home!" and implying that he was a catch because of his whiteness. Further, Gia's mother makes a point of explaining her past boyfriends' behavior through the lens of their whiteness, deeming it as oppositional to her own Hispanic social practices. Though her mother is supportive of her dating white men, Gia did share some additional advice her mother gave her:

> She's very like stereotypical, she'll make comments like "Oh, white people are very emotionally detached from their children and that's why these boys that you date act this way because their parents weren't as loving to them as like a Hispanic parent was." Like, she's said that before and I was just like "What?"
>
> Or... she'll say like "I think Jewish people grew up this way" or whatever and I'm just like "What?" [laughs] Or, like if I date Hispanic guys, which I have before, I've dated a really Hispanic guy actually, she's like "Oh, he's just a typical *machismo*-like Hispanic guy, like trying to be tough or whatever and that's just how they are, so, that's just how men are." And I'm like "Okay, well, it is kind of racist to say that."

This advice positions white people as lacking in some way. Despite appearing white to others, Gia and her family position themselves as culturally separate from non-Hispanic white people. However, as evidenced in the above quotes, Gia's mother deliberately uses

ethnicity and other cultural markers as an indicator of the qualities that any men will bring into relationships with her daughter. The role of family members and friends in strengthening women's feelings about where difference does and does not lie is especially significant for those who are racially white within a U.S. racial structure despite being ethnically "non-white." However, the women I spoke with who cannot pass as white – especially those who are mixed with black – relied much more heavily on skin color and physical difference as their barometer of an interracial relationship. In fact, for several women, interracial relationships seemed to only involve a white person. They were rarely inclined to say that partners who had similar appearances or who shared some of their racial mixture where interracial because of some cultural difference, indicating that the ability to even claim a so-called cultural difference depends on having accessibility to whiteness in the first place.

Frame Three: Familiarity as Undesirable ("Cousins" Matter)

The third frame used by my respondents when discussing race in relationships and what may count as "interracial" revolved around the notion of familiarity, especially in the form of male family members, such as brothers, cousins, or perhaps a father or uncle. This frame is comprised of two parts: first, the invocation of "he reminded me too much of my cousin" or some other male family member; and second, that anyone who is not the *exact same* racial mixture is an interracial relationship. For this frame, women use notions of familial closeness as a means of determining whom they will *not* date, as that familiarity is undesirable, or determines who is not within their racial in-group.

This was the least common framework among the women I spoke with. The concern with familiarity – specifically serving as a reminder of a male family member – was reserved for men of color, as no respondents ever indicated a concern over potential white partners reminding them of any white family members. Women who invoked this frame only used it to discuss why they could not date certain men with specific racial and/or ethnic backgrounds and these men were overwhelmingly of East Asian or South Asian descent. For instance, early in our interview, Shelby, a 25-year-old who identifies as Indian and white, was one of several women who discussed how potential partners could be a reminder of family members. With her thin, loosely curly light brown hair and very fair-skinned appearance, Shelby could very easily pass as what she termed as a "fluffy" – meaning overweight – white woman. She prided herself on her bright green eyes, noting at several points in the interview that she and her siblings all had light eyes that distinguished them from their darker-skinned cousins (whom Shelby described as closer to my tan skin tone and not "Somali dark"). During our interview, she told me about the men she had dated in the past leading up to the present:

> This Indian guy, he was really nice. I was like, I'm gonna give it a try. And then we met and I heard his accent in person and I was just like [whispers] "I can't do this!"
>
> So we had this really fun date and we went to a movie and we did bowling and we got food and then at the end of the night it was just like, "Sorry man, it was like hanging out with my cousin. We can't do this again." [laughs]

Here, Shelby describes how her date was "really fun" and lasted quite a long time, incorporating several activities such as a movie, bowling, and dinner. Yet, she is adamant that this man, while nice and fun, was not worth seeing again due to having an accent.

Further, she describes this man as reminding her of her cousin; therefore, he is an unacceptable partner. In perceiving this man as equal to male members of her family, Shelby suggests to remind her of a male family member is to inspire revulsion. This revulsion manifested even in her body language as she told the story, closing her eyes, whispering, shuddering, and then laughing in short bursts as she said "I can't do this" and "it was like hanging out with my cousin." The revulsion she both describes and exhibits here is key, as it suggests that to date someone who is like family is unacceptable.

For Shelby, this man's accent was too much like male members of her family. She noted that she would not have had as much of an issue had he appeared assimilated and not had an accent, as his appearance alone was not what made him unappealing. In this way, the discomfort Shelby expresses with potentially dating men who are similar to her male family members seems to also result from concerns around assimilation, essentially serving as a proxy for how Americanized a potential partner may be and what kinds of politics they may bring into the relationship. Her position can also be interpreted as resulting from a broader devaluing of South Asian men as romantic partners in U.S. media. I noted that it was interesting that Shelby found this Indian man unattractive as a result of his accent and reminding her of her cousin, since another of my respondents – part-Korean – had described her discomfort with dating someone who was "too Asian." Though Shelby had gone on to describe her encounters and relationships with other men, she came back to the man she had rejected to explain further:

> But a lot of it is in the voice. If somebody looked like my brother, it wouldn't matter to me. But his tone of voice? Some people like the familiarity. If I also sounded – like if I had an accent? – it probably wouldn't bother me. But the fact

> that I have an American accent and most of my older family members do have an accent, its like you're part of that category in my mind as far as when I hear that tone in the voice.
>
> Like if you're mixed with Korean and white and you grew up in America, you're used to hearing an American accent and sometimes, the other, depending on tone, is just… it's just too familiar in a good way or a bad way, it can probably be either way.

Here, Shelby makes clear distinctions between what she calls an American accent and a non-American accent – what she refers to as the "tone" of someone's voice. She makes clear that physical features alone are not what create her discomfort, but rather the way that one speaks. Being "part of that category" suggests that having an accent marks one an immigrant, a familiarity that Shelby finds unappealing. Assimilation into American culture appears to be at the center of Shelby's romantic ideal, as she also noted that she resists dating men who are Muslim. In using Muslim faith and an Indian or South Asian accent as a marker of an undesirable "familiarity," Shelby suggests a desire to leave behind certain aspects of her Indian family. Though she continues to work for the family business and fondly described her family dinners with all of the cousins together (due to living next door to each other in an almost make-shift compound with a singular yard enclosing several neighboring homes), Shelby expresses a desire for more American(ized) partners for her committed relationships.

To this end, Shelby had noted throughout our conversation that she easily could pass as white or "American." She reinforced this whiteness when she enthusiastically discussed her practice of telling people that she is a "quarter Finnish." By exercising her ethnic option (Waters 1990), Shelby makes the importance of assimilation and whiteness

evident. She desires to partner with someone who has no "accent" and who, presumably, will appreciate her Finnish heritage, as well as the light-colored eyes that she and all of her siblings possess (a physical trait she seemed especially proud of). Yet, Shelby's most recent and longest lasting relationship – with a Jewish and Hispanic man she described as "looking white" – was considered an interracial one through the cultural difference framing used by many other women. In fact, though Shelby noted that most people would not doubt that she and her ex-boyfriend were both "white," she described him as coming from a low-income, drug problem-riddled city where "people are not being taught responsibility." Shelby prided herself on the way that her family valued "work ethic and responsibility" and she cited this as a major reason for the downfall of her relationship.

Along these same lines, Aidah (a mixed-ethnicity Bangladeshi 27-year-old first introduced in Chapter 3) noted several characteristics that she finds unappealing:

> …if somebody has an accent, I will not talk to them. If somebody cannot speak English properly, I will not talk to them. From like, Bengali culture, if they have, you know, like backwards views? I don't talk to them. And my parents don't seem to like, think that's a big deal.
>
> I mean, the fact of the matter is, neither of my parents have an accent. Nobody in my family has an accent. And so, everybody speaks English extremely well. So, when it comes to like them trying to get me to talk to somebody who's like born and raised in Bangladesh – my ideas, their ideas, they don't match up. And they haven't left the country, they don't even know what it's like! You know, outside of the world besides little Bangladesh. And I'm just like, how can you expect me to get with those people or to even talk to them. I can't have a conversation with them because they just have *no* idea what I'm talking about. So, and my mom thinks I'm being picky.

These statements align with Aidah's comments from Chapter 4, where she discussed "running away from brown people." I found the insistence that accents were problematic

to be odd, as Aidah never explained what "accent" it was that she was referring to and she seemed oblivious to the fact that she, too, had an "accent." Aidah frames her disinterest in men without a certain type of English accent as a result of them being unworldly, unlike her family, who she stated "all had doctorate's degrees" and who highly valued education. She described her family as "middle class" and "classy", noting the family's ties to the Bangladeshi revolution, the United Nations, and being college professors. Education was a major concern for Aidah throughout our interview, as well as other characteristics:

> And so, I don't want somebody who's überly religious, either, 'cause I'm never gonna wear a hijab. Um my mom is never gonna wear a hijab either, so I don't know why she keeps calling me picky.

While Aidah does not outright state that she is not interested people who remind her of male family members, she did point out the internal family struggles she was observing in response to one of her brothers marrying an American white woman. She noted that her parents were "having a hard time with it" even though her brother was happy. She mentioned that her mother was dramatically exclaiming that she could never show her face in public while the first thing her father asked was what faith the children would be. Aidah mentioned that as her father has aged, he has become more religious and in her words, more judgmental; it seemed evident that there was a great deal of pressure on her to marry someone "Muslim and brown" because she was the "goody-goody" and because she is a woman. However, Aidah stated that she did not see herself "being that happy" if she married "someone *that* Muslim and *that* brown."

The statements that Aidah and Shelby make are clearly classed – as assimilation into American and/or Western culture via the lack of a discernable accent connotes certain levels of education and social mobility. When these women are rejecting men who remind them of their male family members who still have accents or other characteristics, they are rejecting not only familiarity, but also a classed masculinity that they seem to imagine will hold them back. Further, several other women who did not identify as mixed-Asian expressed anti-Asian sentiments in terms of the men they could see themselves dating or sleeping with, mapping on to the observed patters around desirability seen in other online dating studies that marginalize Asian men. However, assimilation into broader U.S. or Western culture seems to be an underlying concern for many women, even if they do not state it explicitly, considering the ways in which accents, proficiency with English, and observance of Islamic faith begin to serve as proxies not only for Western-ness or American-ness but also supposed tendencies to be more patriarchal or traditional in gender roles and politics. As legal scholar Sahar Aziz (2015) argues, Muslim American women (and I would imagine, any women perceived to be Muslim) experience particularly adverse affects in U.S. society due to increased Islamophobia post-September 11th, 2001. Aziz terms the implicit and explicit pressures to assimilate as "coercive assimilationism" (p. 342); though Aziz is specifically referencing assimilation in the workplace, I find this framing applicable to the ways in which the women I interviewed strive to "behave, talk, dress, and otherwise mirror the majority" which Aziz attests is white, heterosexual, and male. Unsurprisingly, women who are vehemently against dating or seriously considering Arab and South Asian men as

potential partners demonstrated a tendency to not only find white men attractive, but also to date them over other men of color. So, while women may not be trying to *be* white men as Aziz argues, they are clearly working to establish relationships *with* white men. These relationships appear to be a means of establishing social legitimacy and to actively accept and abide by Eurocentric norms.

Alternative to some of the assimilation logics that women like Shelby and Aidah share, Rahel, a 28-year-old who identifies as Persian and Mexican, rejected some men for other reasons:

> They're very like, that typical Persian where they're flashy and with their Mercedes and that's just off putting to me. I definitely judge them. I guess that's not so much their race…Because I know regular, just casual Persian dudes that are fine but I don't know. I'm not usually attracted to them. Or any Persian guys. I'm not sure why.

Rahel tries to soften her rejection of Persian men by stating that her revulsion is not about their race, following up with the fact that she knows "regular" and "casual" Persian men who are tolerable and apparently, not stereotypical. However, she does not at any point mention that she has an attraction to Persian men who are "regular" either. When I asked Rahel why she was not attracted to Persian guys, she elaborated with the following:

> Yeah, I think it's because of my dad. My dad's great, I love him, we have a great relationship but I'm like avoiding him. Or maybe it's weird for me because my dad's Persian. You know, like that kind of weird?

When Rahel says that dating a Persian man would be "that kind of weird," she is expressing anxiety around dating someone too close to the family, specifically her father. Following these comments I asked Rahel if she had a similar view toward Hispanic men, to which she immediately said no. So, her rejection of Persian men is very specific, and

something she relates back to her father's rather than her mother's side of the family. Rahel noted that according to U.S. categories she would be considered white; her pale skin tone was emphasized by her thick dark brown hair and distinct dark eyebrows, and her braces seemed to prevent her from smiling too much. According to her, the only features that gave away her Persian background were her "hairiness" and her thin, hooked nose. Rahel was also one of several women who stated that unless someone was the exact same racial mixture she was, it would be an interracial relationship. When I asked her what she saw as an interracial relationship, she replied:

> Yeah, I'm mixed. Well, it was a lot of Caucasian people and one Hispanic guy, but that's only half, so that's mixed. I usually date a lot of Caucasian guys. I mean I think honestly…anyone that's not Persian and Hispanic, I guess I would say. 'Cause I have this other element to me that's not represented in that other person. That's still seeing it as interracial. Maybe I am some of what you are but I have this whole other side of me. That's still part of me.

The notion that unless someone is the exact same mixture, the relationship is not interracial, implies that something inherent makes the mixed-race person and another person different, even when they are "some of the same thing." Rather than mixedness serving as a link between multiple racial groups, as the narrative around *TIME Magazine*'s "Eve" cover figure suggests, mixed-race women who argue that they are basically always in an interracial relationship render themselves a distinct racial group (see in the earlier section how Autumn states that any relationship she would be in would inherently be interracial due to her presence). However, this also plays into the idea that when someone is mixed, race is no longer as significant. Prior to this quote, Rahel talked about not "feeling very Mexican or very Persian" and that she just felt "very human, very

beyond that." By invoking the notion that she is "beyond" these racial and ethnic categories, she articulates a desire to render race less significant.

Though male partners reminding women of family is considered an undesirable trait for several of my participants, some also appreciated things or people that were familiar. For instance, Lorena shared a complicated understanding of her relationships:

> I think, honestly, probably what's comfortable is that I don't have to monitor myself quite so carefully for… [long pause] …for ways that I might accidentally, or at least not… I don't have to like monitor who I am, like I know I am not the… I am in the intersection of race and gender with a white guy, like I know where I am and how to play that if I want to towards what I want out of the dynamic? Or I at least know how to navigate that dynamic. And I feel like with other combinations I would not necessarily know how to do something that wasn't like celebrating my own s…status?
>
> This may firmly fall under the like overthinking strategy… or it may not. So, like, the comfort zone is in some way modeling what I saw my parents do. Which is a white guy and a not-white lady and the interaction they had. Which is not necessarily something I'd like to emulate but it is at least familiar, in the family familiar sense.

Lorena, a generally straightforward and clear speaker throughout our interview was quite flustered when trying to explain what she meant by "monitoring" herself. Because of her own racial politics – particularly identifying as Chicana and not wanting to whiten herself as her mother had done – Lorena seemed concerned with her whiteness possibly being celebrated in the context of an interracial relationship with men who are not white. So, even with her comfort and familiarity with white men as dating partners, she still described these relationships as at least being similar to her parents relationship – which she deemed interracial – and per her earlier comments, "intercultural."

One of my earliest interviews, Allyson (a white and Filipino 27-year-old first introduced in Chapter 3) had a very complicated relationship with not only her own racial identity but also negotiating her romantic interests. Throughout the interview, she dismayed over the fact that so many of the men she went on dates with were white – 75 percent by her estimate. She further explained:

> I feel like I have a lot of distrust about white guys in general. I don't trust their intentions and I don't trust that they are telling me exactly how they feel or that they're attracted to me or that their attraction isn't fucked up in some way.
>
> …Yeah, I will still go on dates. I will still go on dates with them. The uh - loneliness is a really powerful force for making you reach toward something that's not perhaps what you're intentionally looking for. [laughs]

Despite her insistence that white men were not trustworthy, Allyson was still very willing to give white men a chance. She further elaborated about this tension by describing the pressures she feels in her career as a filmmaker, where women and especially women of color are extremely marginalized. So, while white men do not appear to be what she would want in an ideal world (in Chapter 4, she notes that she is more comfortable and feels "safer" around men of color) Allyson still gives them a shot. When I asked if this willingness to be open to white men even though they seem to disappoint her stems from the fact that she has white family members, she enthusiastically stated, "Oh absolutely!" She claimed that being able to "speak to white interactions" assisted with this. Her white family members and apparent adeptness with the language of whiteness suggest a comfort and familiarity that Allyson has no interest in discarding completely. Even so, when describing a date she had gone on with a Vietnamese-American man, she expresses some confusing feelings:

> I had a really good date with this guy who was a scientist here in town. I think he was Vietnamese American? We had a really good conversation about being a person of color in Austin and he was great and he reminded me so much of my little brother that I didn't want to go on another date with him.
>
> He was a lovely person. And like…he had the same vocal patterns as my 17-year-old brother and I felt so comfortable with him and I think it was because he reminded me a ton of like my baby brother…and so [laughs] I really liked this guy and we were able to have a conversation about growing up Asian that was great and then it didn't go anywhere 'cause [laughs] I wasn't attracted to him.

Allyson's description of a man who could relate to her experiences growing up and who understood what it was like to be a marginalized person in a majority white city like Austin sounded like all of the things she was missing in her interactions with white men, both in her professional and romantic life. And yet, this man who reminded her of her brother did not make it past the first date. Allyson's responses echo the concerns of Shelby – who also was turned off just by the sound of someone's voice – as well as the seeming "weirdness" that Rahel alluded to. The fact that white men are never described as being rendered unattractive due to too close a resemblance to family members indicates a deeper issue around race and attractiveness.

Conclusion: Seeing Race, Framing Difference

Overall, I find that mixed-race women utilize these three narrative/ideological frames to distinguish what is and what is not an interracial relationship. The first frame, "color", refers to women make distinctions based on skin color and physical appearance. The second frame, "culture", positions differences in cultural practices and values as what makes a relationship interracial. The third frame, "cousin" or what I refer to here as

familiarity, means that women will actively avoid dating certain men who share racial and ethnic characteristics with male members of the women's families. Framing is central to how we understand our social world – without frames, we would struggle to convey or process information. As Joe Feagin (2000) notes, the white racial frame allows white Americans to interpret and defend white privileges and "advantaged conditions" as merited and earned over inferiors rather than as a result of systemic oppression (p. 25). This framing relies on stereotypes, narratives, images and language, racialized emotions, and what Feagin terms an inclination toward discriminatory action. Thus, a white racial frame influences what people know, understand, see and hear, feel, and of course, what they do. In this way, a frame relies on a particular way of telling or explaining, as well as a system of beliefs that both guides the ways of telling about, but also the understanding of, social phenomena.

Even though people of color may develop what Feagin calls counter-frames that push anti-oppression language and a focus on "home culture" (Feagin 2009, pp. 155-175), it is unclear how mixed-race people operationalize counter-framing in opposition to the dominant white racial frame. Feagin presents President Barack Obama as an example of someone who embraced the black counter-frame as part of his signaling to black constituents, while not using it in other realms where it would negatively impact his ability to be elected (pp. 181-183). There is no clarification given as to whether this caution around deploying counter-frames is a characteristic of multiracial people or of politicians; based on the findings presented in this chapter, it would appear that engaging with racial counter-frames is first dependent upon familial socialization and secondly,

upon the racial and ethnic background of a person. As Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2013) describes, frames are the "set paths for interpreting information," the places where people "filter" various aspects of their experience (p. 74). When considering how multiracial people understand what is and is not an interracial relationship, it should not be surprising that multiracial people utilize aspects of existing racial ideology and social frames to inform their definitions. As much as segments of society seem to believe that mixed-race people and mixed-race families will turn everything Americans know about race upside down, in many ways, multiracial people continue to uphold many of the same logics.

Mixed-race women have a multitude of frames that they use to discuss their own racial identities and how they construct the identities of their relationships around race. Most women invoked several of these frames over the course of their interviews, sometimes using multiple in one answer. Therefore, these frames form a vocabulary for discussing race and intimate relationships. Through these narratives, mixed-race women promote a colorblind logic around dating, repeatedly stating that, "race doesn't matter" or that they do not "see" race while in their everyday realities they are *not* colorblind at all. The frames that mixed-race women use to define the racial boundaries of relationships depend heavily on physical appearance and cultural ties, as well as the desire for social assimilation. For the multiracial women I interviewed, the tone of their skin influenced how they drew racial boundaries. Lighter skinned women made themselves distinct from partners with similar appearances based on what they called cultural difference. Despite many light skinned women naming white partners in particular as in being significantly different from them, women continued to express a preference for white men in the

stories they shared of who they dated as well as who they pointed out to me. Further, familiarity – in which multiracial women refer to how much potential partners remind them of male family members – becomes a means of ruling out relationships, overwhelmingly to the detriment of men of color.

Thus, for mixed-race women, the drawing of racial boundaries around being "of color" reinforces existing racial hierarchies and inequalities. Men of color are the partners that mixed-race women can find a reason to exclude, whereas white men seem to be rarely put through such rigorous analysis. These mixed-race women engage in a form of sexual racism – the racial prejudice enacted in the context of sex or romance – when selecting their partners, utilizing these frames as a means of covering up their discriminatory ideology. Despite the fact that people of color have multiple frames with which they engage, the white racial frame is in constant competition with anti-racist frames (Feagin 2009, pp. 189-191). It is evident in this chapter that differences in embodiment and cultural upbringing impact how mixed-race people engage with these competing frames, especially given the history of the white racial frame privileging lighter skin color and associating whiteness (and perhaps, near whiteness?) with the notion of liberty (Feagin 2009, p. 158). The preferences that multiracial and multiethnic women express for white men, with little real questioning of that preference, demonstrates the ways that men of color remain disadvantaged in the dating market and the ways that the white racial frame becomes internalized. This also shows how people with multiracial identities can be complicit in promoting a white supremacist society, even while feeling that they are colorblind and not white themselves.

In the next chapter, I will more extensively discuss these findings in tandem with the findings from my previous chapters, laying out my broader conclusions and the implications of this research for other sociological work around multiracial people and romantic relationships in the United States.

CONCLUSION

(MIXED-)RACE, INTIMACY, AND THE ENDURING POWER OF THE COLOR LINE

> We desperately need to hear and tell. …We are looking not only for reflection but also for affirmation, advice, and a space to hear our side of the story told without taking into account someone else's agenda, needs, or expectations. And yet the stories we tell and the frustrated questions raised by us and by many women are not without connection to these surrounding forces.
>
> - Tricia Rose, *Longing to Tell* (2003)

When I began this project, I was interested in discovering whether there was something unique and specific to the multiracial woman's dating experience that enabled her to find a success in online dating that seemingly was not attainable for some others. Christina Rudder (2014) contends that *OkCupid* users who add "white" as part of their ethnic identifiers on the site see significant boosts across the board in attractiveness ratings compared to those who select only Latina/o, black, or Asian (pp. 108-109). According to Rudder, this trend – across both men and women heterosexual users – both reinforces the preference for whiteness and somehow, manages to be "practically an accident" (p. 111). The fact that other sociological studies (namely, Curington et al. 2015 and McGrath et. al. 2016) have also provided evidence of a seeming advantage for multiracial people who identify as part white only emboldened my curiosity. And yet, it has become clear that a great degree of complexity has been left out of these assertions. Like the quote above from Tricia Rose, the women I interviewed told me stories full of hope, confusion, and frustration, with deep concerns regarding their ability to find love

and happiness in an increasingly online-focused dating world. As they described to me their efforts to "put themselves out there" and to be "open-minded", one running thread became glaringly obvious. That thread is the issue of the color line.

Though W.E.B. Du Bois framed the color line as the social and political barriers that separate the experiences and access to opportunities of black and white people in the United States, more contemporary framings of the color line discuss the breakages between whites and non-whites and even, blacks and non-blacks. Per Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's triracial conception, whites are buffered from the collective black by a group of honorary whites, a group that is argued to be inclusive of multiracial people (Bonilla-Silva 2013). All of these systems of categorization rely on notions of race and ethnicity as locations between which certain people can slip. In *Tripping on the Color Line* (2000), Heather Dalmage argues that, "The closer individuals live to the color line, the more often they are forced to contend with the changing dynamics of race" (p. 17). She notes that those who live close to the line know that race is anything but simple and that they may "trip" in a variety of ways, at times when they least expect it. This was evident for some of the women I interviewed, like Kai (a black and Asian 22-year-old first introduced in Chapter 4):

> Like, there were a couple black guys that I was interested in and they were kind of like uh, just never really looked at me that way or were only kind of dating white girls. And then, white guys were just kind of like, "Oh man, you're my cool friend," you know? Just like instant friend zone and it was… and it was always really… I don't know. I was always kind of like "Well, do you think they would date me? Or do you think they're in love? And they're just like 'uh uh uh.'" And so, it was really hard there and I just didn't, at all. Yeah.

The pain in Kai's voice as she described her unsuccessful attempts to find people interested in dating her was palpable; she noted that her experiences in college were a motivating factor in her signing up for online dating accounts. Though many women experienced Kai's feelings of rejection (often wondering what was "wrong" with them) the fact that women who are browner-skinned and larger-bodied are the majority of my respondents sharing in these experiences is telling. This finding makes it more evident that feelings of self-blame about a perceived inability to date "successfully" are racialized – with darker-skinned women criticizing themselves more often – and related to notions of attractiveness. In a society that privileges thinness and blames overweight people for any social inequality they may experience, it is not surprising that larger-bodied women would be concerned that they are at fault for their dating lives not working out as they may have hoped.

For other women, tripping occurred while they were in committed relationships. Sexual activities in particular were a space where men often made their partners feel uncomfortable and self-conscious through the act(s) of expressing shock or disgust at certain parts of their body, like what Jacinta (a black and white 24-year-old first introduced in Chapter 4) experienced with a long-term boyfriend:

> So, I dated one guy who wasn't used to like… uh… the smell of hair product for… like black hair products? So, like the cocoas and the sheas and any type of the oils or butters, anything with a crème. So, apparently, some crazy reaction happened whenever I sweat during sex every night with whatever crème or oil I had in my hair and he would be like, dry heaving like it was his job. It was so crazy, to the point where for a second I was like "Oh, well I guess I can't wear oil in my hair anymore."

Though Jacinta tried to explain away her experiences with this boyfriend (and her sexual experiences with others) as a lack of familiarity, the fact that a number of women shared disturbingly fetishistic stories with me points to a critical moment in romantic relationships where mixed-race women are rendered as racial others, overwhelmingly by white men. These moments are only a few of many where multiracial and multiethnic women came to certain realizations about their bodies and how other people saw them. In fact, for several women, the significance of these moments truly dawned on them once they shared them with me. As my respondents' dating experiences have illustrated throughout this dissertation, racial identity and appearance are extremely significant in how multiracial women navigate their intimate lives. Physical appearance informs: how women are read by observers online; how they take up discourses and logics around race and racism, and subsequently, employ these discourses and logics as vetting tools while dating; and how they situate racial boundaries within their committed relationships.

In exploring the ways that multiracial and multiethnic women navigate the color line, this project contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the contemporary dynamics of dating as facilitated by online dating platforms both on Internet websites and via smart phone applications. By providing this insight into the strategies, practices, and ways of thinking about dating and relationships this dissertation provides a sense of what is happening underneath the broader patters of discrimination that social scientists are seeing on online dating websites, as well as giving a sense of what is happening from a users perspective in terms of experiencing these interactions both on- and off-line. It is certainly not new that cultural knowledge and phenotype impact how mixed-race people

identify and whether or not they engage in practices that allow them to assimilate into whiteness (Davenport 2016; Miyawaki 2016; Rockquemore 2002; Rockquemore et al. 2006; Saperstein and Penner 2012). As Michael K. Brown (2003) and colleagues argue, the experiences of those perceived as white and those as nonwhite are "intimately connected" with the benefits of being white being related to the costs of being non-white (p. 51). Though the white-reading women I interviewed understand themselves as non-white, they also recognize that to outsiders, they often are assumed to be white and are capable of reaping the social benefits of whiteness. Further, it is only with the experiences of the darker-skinned multiracial women for comparison are the privileged positions of lighter-skinned women placed into vivid relief. What Kerry Ann Rockquemore (2002) describes for black and white mixed-race women, is evident here as well; colorism within various racialized communities, in addition to the gendered effects of multiracial identity impact not only racial identity construction but also the approaches people have to relationships with others. Thus, this dissertation serves as a guide to tracing the many manifestations of the color line at various stages in the online dating process, from setting up one's dating profile to maintaining a long-term relationship as evidenced by the three empirical chapters that comprise this study.

First, in Chapter 3, I unpack the ways in which multiracial and multiethnic women rely on their photographs and the available identity options on *OkCupid* to draw attention to their racial and ethnic identities, rather than writing about them extensively in their essays. The fact that photographs are the central means of establishing attractiveness serves to reinforce the power of racial biases. Regardless of the effort and attention paid

to impression management through pictures, I suggest that if multiracial women do experience any advantages when it comes to online dating it has to do with the way that their photographs are perceived by other users and whatever racial and ethnic identity options they select. The impact of the color line manifests here in the ways that white appearing women described men finding out about their multiracial and multiethnic backgrounds as a "cool" feature whereas darker-skinned women were often questioned about what they were, with claims that they could not be "just" or "all" black for instance due to their hair length and texture.

In Chapter 4, I illustrate the ways that multiracial and multiethnic women may rely upon incidences of racism, police brutality, or Islamophobia as a tool to strategically determine whether someone is worth dating or not. These *vetting strategies* include practices such as actively listening for certain cues that clue one in to a possible partner's thinking on race, sex, and gender, or bringing up specific cultural touchstones to force a person to articulate their views, among others. The widespread use of specific language related to the Black Lives Matter movement – in the form of discussions of the "racial climate", which lives "matter" or "cops versus people" – there is an evident racial grammar that shapes how the women I interviewed see race in everyday life. Further, the breakage between women who described being viewed as white (or being able to pass as white) and those women who could not demonstrates how important perceptions about the state of race in the U.S. is for dating. The predominant use of discourses around racial incidents by women who identified as being mixed with black or Arab in order to get to know more about their potential dating partners illustrates how the labor of discerning

racist and xenophobic partners falls primarily on women who are always read as women of color. Overwhelmingly, I find that multiracial and multiethnic women who did not describe experiencing the ability to pass into whiteness uninhibited possess more significant awareness of the ways in which their skin color – and subsequently, their race – requires a more critical and nuanced assessment of whiteness and issues of race.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I argue that mixed-race women utilize three narrative/ideological frames – color, culture, and "cousin" – to distinguish between what is and what is not an interracial relationship. Utilizing aspects of existing racial ideology and social frames to inform their definitions, multiracial women continue to uphold mainstream racial logics and form a vocabulary for discussing race and intimate relationships. The invocation of several of these frames over the course of one interview illustrates the contradictory nature of many mixed-race women's racial thinking, even as these narratives work together to promote a colorblind logic around dating. The role of skin color significantly influenced how racial boundaries were drawn, as lighter skinned women made themselves distinct from partners with similar appearances based on what they called cultural difference. Racial identity became most salient in situations where women needed to reject male partners, relying on the frame of familiarity to justify their boundary creation. In these ways, the drawing of racial boundaries around being "of color" reinforces existing racial hierarchies and inequalities.

The generous and honest voices of my respondents demonstrate how perceived skin-color, racialized experiences, and personal racial and cultural identity work together to inform the ways that multiracial and multiethnic women fluctuate between different

relationships to the color line. Though the darker-skinned women that I spoke to rarely described moments where they benefitted from even a marginal proximity to whiteness, they could provide a litany of examples of the ways in which they experienced either anti-blackness or some other form of xenophobia. These moments continued to come up throughout the interviews despite many darker-skinned women espousing that they had not experienced incidences where their race "mattered." Of course, this narrative was contradicted once women shared stories of being called racial slurs – such as "nigger" or "terrorist" – or some other incident that was framed as falling in the realm of outlier, rather than as a norm (in their perception). Even with the whiter skinned respondents, they would move in-and-out of the realm of whiteness depending on whom they were interacting with and in what context. This was particularly the case for the women who were of Arab and Middle Eastern descent, considering that if there were scenarios in which Islamophobia was running rampant then they would be quite firmly removed from the protections that presumed whiteness provides. However, even for those women who were not necessarily part of a group that is as visibly marginalized (in terms of Muslim people, black people, and even Hispanics and Latinos, particularly those who are darker skinned) there was an interesting negotiation of proximities to whiteness and how to remove oneself from whiteness based not just on appearance but things like familial and cultural ties, as well as cultural knowledge and political stances. So, the color line is not necessarily strictly drawn between those who explicitly pass as white and those who do not. There are also moments of permeability, though that flexibility tends to be afforded more to women on the lighter skinned end of the spectrum and especially those who are

not of mixed-black descent, speaking, perhaps, to the powerful hold that a black-white binary has even as other kinds of marginal racial positions are included.

Contributions to the Sociological Literature

Specifically, this project makes three interventions into the sociological literature on, and study of, race and ethnicity, gender, and romantic relationships. First, I contribute needed additional and detailed research on the lives of contemporary mixed-race women. Multiracial people remain an understudied population outside of research that focuses on identity development processes (see Renn 2004; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2008; Rockquemore et al. 2006; Root 1990, 1992) or theorizing about mixedness as an avenue for new understandings of the world beyond binaries (see Anzaldúa 2007; Daniel 2001; Ifekwunigwe 1999) and an alleged "post-racial" society (see Carter 2013; Dariotis and Yoo 2012; Hochschild et al. 2012). I found it important to add to the emerging sociological work that is beginning to question the impact of multiraciality on how people navigate race, dating, and other forms of relationship formation (see Curington et al. 2015; Feliciano and Kizer 2016; McGrath et al. 2016; Qian and Lichter 2011; Rafalow et al. 2017; Rudder 2014). Though these scholars are foregrounding the added complexities that multiracial identity can introduce in these dynamics, particularly in the realm of online dating, very few studies utilize qualitative data to answer these questions. With my addition to this growing area of study, I provide documentation of the perspectives of mixed-race women who use online dating and how they view race and ethnicity as impacting their experiences.

Second, this dissertation contributes further evidence of the instability of mixed-race as a category and how the "kind" of mixedness of a person is significant in terms of how they experience race in their romantic lives, among other social categories such as gender and class. This instability is critical in terms of countering theoretical perspectives that converge around a logic of "exchange" of social status between people occupying various social strata. A sizeable segment of the literature on dating and marriage more broadly relies on notions of the "market" to discuss how changes in structural opportunities have seemingly allowed for people to close racial group boundaries through intermarriage (see Blau et al. 1984; Qian and Lichter 2001, 2007, 2011) though even this argument is limited considering that the majority of interracial relationships have been found to involve white people with racial minorities, rather than *between* racial minorities (Batson et al. 2006). Where multiracial people are included in this research, those who identify as mixed with white are privileged and per some scholars (Qian and Lichter 2007, 2011), some mixed-white multiracials (white-Asian and white-Native American) are found to be more likely to identify as white and to marry white people, supposedly blurring the boundaries between whites, Asians, and Natives (Qian and Lichter 2011, p. 1068). A market exchange logic fails to adequately account for the experiences of various types of multiracial people as they are both disproportionately valued for their alleged attractiveness (Sims 2012) and are inconsistently racialized by other people (Feliciano 2016; Sims 2016), making their "exchange" rate in dating and marriage markets practically unmeasurable. Therefore, the experiences of my respondents demonstrate that perceived race plays a large role in how mixed-race women navigate

finding a partner, in addition to racial and ethnic socialization within their families or what some scholars called "lived race" (Harris and Sim 2002). The labeling of mixed-race online daters as more "successful" overall based on data that mostly includes people who are identifying as mixed with white fails to take appearance into account, implicitly falling short in terms of expanding on the experiences of women who are not fair-skinned. By giving voice to women of a variety of self-identified mixtures, showing how they rarely described their experiences using logics of success, and demonstrating how notions of the market do not clearly translate to how people navigate everyday life, this dissertation evidences the limitations of this language while also emphasizing the need to account for appearance and racial/ethnic backgrounds of multiracial people in conversations of attractiveness.

Lastly, this dissertation provides a method for better understanding how people live their lives both on- and off-line. Sociologists strive to document the messiness of human life; the explosion of the popularity of internet and social media over the last several decades have provided ample material for trying to grasp how technology impacts the formation and reaffirming of identity (Kende et al. 2016; Siibak 2009) and the building of community and relationships (see Ansari and Klinenberg 2015; Bauman 2003; Mason 2016; Petersen 2014; Robinson 2013; Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012). However, social science often approaches studying these topics through survey methods or through accessing "big data" from online platforms. Some studies that interview users of online dating websites have focused on non-heterosexual users (see Robinson 2015) but as of this writing, no studies of online dating and multiracial identity have used

interview data. Further, my contribution of platform elicitation method, which builds on the tenets of photo elicitation, establishes a practice for sociologists to view their respondents "in action" in ways that are otherwise difficult when studying online interactions. Additionally, inclusion of this method as part of the in-depth interview allows for the contrasting of what respondents have said up to this point with what they do in front of the interviewer. This also facilitates an opportunity for respondents to clearly explain their perspectives on the website in question and to provide further evidence of their experiences (through pulling up messages, chats, and photos to demonstrate their points). This method contributes a means of collecting data that bridges the research practices of sociology and other fields such as communication and various "user experience" (UX) studies implemented by tech industry companies.

Limitations and Future Directions

Though my focus in this dissertation has been on the gendered dynamics of multiracial and multiethnic identity as viewed through the perspectives of mixed-race women, I also recognize that curtailing my population to women interested in heterosexual sex places limitations on the types of conclusions that can be drawn. As I noted in Chapter 1, little of the existing literature that includes mixed-race men mentions mixedness as factor that may enhance or inhibit dating potential, suggesting a gendered experience of mixedness. However, more recent research (Newman 2016) notes that the desirability of male multiracial teenagers amongst their peers – what the author refers to as a desire for the "standard light skin" – depends on notions of black masculinity. So,

while mixed-race women and girls are often marked as desirable and/or attractive explicitly because of their racial ambiguity, multiracial men and boys are found to be marked as attractive based on proximity to other racialized masculinities. Though in many ways, multiracial men are understudied, I found it important to focus on women for this project due to the social legibility of multiraciality as feminine and sexually desirable, as well as an embodiment of the some future where racism no longer exists.

Further, in limiting myself to women who expressed an interest in men (while not necessarily exclusively in men) privileges heterosexuality over other modes of sexuality. These gaps provide direction for the next stages of this research, especially given the understudied nature of lesbian, bisexual, and other queer-identified women and their romantic lives. Gloria González-López (2005) notes in her study of immigrant sexualities that much of feminist scholarship tends to polarize women against men, particularly excluding the experiences women and men of color have of, and with, love and sex (p. 4). Her words ring especially true when I think about the voices that are missing in this study, namely the voices of the men of color who may be striving to pursue relationships through online dating. The fact that my respondents expressed such biased views towards men of color – especially men of East Asian and South Asian descent – suggests that one direction for further research involves heterosexual men who date online, particularly those who experience disproportionate rejection.

I also recognize that class has a limited analysis in this study, especially given the fact that the women I interviewed were highly educated compared to the average American. Further, I did not collect much explicit detail about the economic backgrounds

of my respondents' families. Considering how influential families – especially parents – are on the romantic choices that women make, follow up interviews with the respondents in this study should account for family member careers, incomes, and views of education. Though throughout this text I pay attention to the ways that racialized notions of class are invoked by my respondents – whether through their discussions of certain values they expect potential partners to have or through characteristics like accents – it is necessary for future research to better account for the classed aspects of online dating websites themselves and the ways that people associate a certain quality of partner with a particular platform, tending to privilege websites that may incur membership fees as places where daters are more serious and potentially, more financially-stable. This concern about current or past class background as grounds for compatibility is also likely gendered; future research with male online daters may provide more insight into the ways that are thinking about the class of their potential partners in comparison to women.

Additionally, with this project, I recognize that I cannot effectively make arguments about what women "do" when online dating considering that I only have access to their descriptions of their behaviors and thought processes. It is my hope that an inclusion of several methodologies that I was able to point out some of the places of discrepancy between what is said and what was observed. Moving forward, it is my plan to pursue additional research with heterosexual male users of *OkCupid* in order to get the other side of the dynamic that the women I interviewed describe, specifically from men who may fetishize multiracial and multiethnic women. Particularly in regards to this latter point, this work has significant implications for the study of sexual harassment of

women online. For instance, current research focused on online harassment has explored issues such as cyberbullying, especially in the context of internet-based video gaming (Fox and Tang 2014, 2016) and social media platforms like *Twitter* (Megarry 2014). Scholars have also long drawn connections between the objectification of women in media and the sexual harassment that women experience in various aspects of their lives (see Galdi et al. 2014); with this study, I provide some evidence for the impacts that past experiences of harassment have on the preemptive strategies that women develop to avoid certain encounters while dating online. For example, my respondents note how they will use the messages they receive serve as a barometer of how their profiles may be being viewed: posting a picture of their pet cat may elicit messages exclaiming "Nice pussy" and some women will let these encounters motivate them to include disclaimer notices at the top sections of their profiles or to limit the kinds of photos they post to their profiles. In fact, it appeared that many women spent a lot of time trying to anticipate what kinds of responses they might need to avoid. This is certainly a gendered aspect of dating online and perhaps of participating in social media interaction more generally; future work should try to better account for this phenomenon while also not positioning online dating as a location exclusively for derelict and unsavory behaviors.

Finally, this dissertation makes evident the need for studies of sexuality, intimacy and relationships to consider the impacts of volatile and complex political contexts on how people navigate building and maintaining various forms of relationships. Though it cannot be argued that this study is unique in that people are screening for compatibility based on pressing issues of the time – of course, the impact of various wars, political and

legal entanglements, and social mores of past generations certainly should not be discarded – it is important to recognize that as debates about what constitutes hate speech, the candidacies of racist, misogynist, xenophobic, homophobic and generally all-around terrible leaders in the form of Donald Trump, France's Marine Le Pen, or Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines, and shifting demographics all over the West due to immigration and influxes of refugees from various locations in the global south, there remains a need to understand what race and ethnicity mean to people in the context of these circumstances. These meanings are even more compelling in terms of how people are negotiating the boundaries of love and family, which are often the values that people hope can transcend these social issues. This dissertation makes it clear that the messiness of the social world influences our research in ways that we may not initially imagine and going forward, I certainly intend to be more conscientious about how ask questions about these issues and they ways that my respondents may be being impacted.

Conclusion

> "Oh yeah, you're like the hottest black girl I've ever met before." Oh, that's cool but I don't know how to take that. I don't know if you're upping me or like downing other black people.

In the above quote, Leilani, a 28-year-old who identifies as black and Korean, vocalizes the uncertainty for others and for herself when it comes to interpreting someone's attraction. She described a variety of instances where men would tell her that she could not possibly be just black because of her long hair and her eye shape; her own anxieties about how people viewed her and subsequently tried to categorize her seem

more upsetting in a current political context where blackness is being demonized more than ever. At the time I am writing this conclusion, several incidents of anti-blackness and state violence have occurred: a 15-year-old black high school student in Dallas was recently shot by a police officer with a rifle while trying to leave a house party and in response to an stabbing attack on the University of Texas at Austin's campus that left one student dead, white supremacist flyers were distributed across campus depicting a threatening black man with a knife in the style of minstrel show aesthetics. These are just a few of the incidents that took place this week, let alone since the beginning of 2017.

The continuously violent targeting of people who are racially, ethnically, or culturally different from mainstream white culture in the contemporary United States serves to exacerbate the ways in which those who fall into social positions of ambiguity feel that they are able to find community and connect with others. Though this dissertation provides a glimpse into how some women contend with social and political upheaval and tread the shifting racial and ethnic boundaries in complex ways, I believe that this work also gives a sense of hope even as these women cope with instances of violence, betrayal, and disappointment. More than anything, my respondents believe that finding love is possible. This is clear in how these women keep coming back to online dating websites in the hope that their next attempt will result in a happy ending (or at least a good story to tell their friends). For every horror story, there was a story of a loving relationship or friendship. Even in the midst of the messiness and contradiction my respondents share throughout this dissertation, there is optimism for the possibility of "real" connections; it is here that I see the power of this work.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Schedule

I would like to thank you for your participation in this study. In this interview, I will ask you a series of questions about your experiences with dating, your racial identity, your use of the website, OK Cupid, and what you feel is expected of you when choosing people to date.

I. Establishing Rapport

1. How comfortable do you feel about knowing that you are going to be talking with me about topics related to race and dating on- and off-line?
2. What motivated you to participate in this study?
3. When people talk about dating, what comes to mind?
4. How were you raised to feel about dating and relationships?

II. Demographics

5. How old are you?
6. Do you date men, women, or both?
7. How would you identify your relationship status (i.e. single, married, divorced)?
8. Where were you born and raised? _____
    a. What led you to move to Texas/to _____?
    b. How long have you lived in _____?
    c. How is _____ different from where you used to live
9. Tell me about your educational background. How many years of education have you completed? Did you go to college?
10. What is your occupation? What motivated you to pursue that career?
11. Do you consider yourself to be a religious or spiritual person?
12. Do you have any children? Do you plan/want to have children in the future?

III. Racial Formation

13. When someone asks you about your racial or ethnic identity, how do you identify yourself? Why do you identify as _____?

- **a.** Do you recall when you first started to identify yourself in this way? Why did you decide to identify with this identity?
- **b.** In the past, have you ever identified yourself with a different racial identity? Can you explain that further?
- **c.** In your interactions with other people, how do they identify you when race, ethnicity, or cultural diversity come up in a conversation?
  - **i.** What do you think about that?
  - **ii.** How does that make you feel?
  - **iii.** Do you recall any relevant or meaningful conversations about this particular topic?

14. When you hear the word "mixed-race," what does that mean to you?

15. What do you think people in the U.S. think about mixed-race people? About mixed-race women, specifically?

- **a.** What do you think men think about mixed-race women?
- **b.** What do you think women think?

16. When you think about mixed-race people on TV, in movies, magazines, etc., what is your reaction?

- **a.** How do [use their own examples] make you feel? Why?

17. Do mixed-race people such as _____ impact how you think about yourself? How so?

IV. Racial Identity and Dating Experiences

Now, I will ask some questions about your racial identity and your dating experiences:

18. Can you tell me about the most recent date you've been on?

- **a.** What was memorable about it?

b. Where did you meet this person?

c. Tell me about this person: what do they look like, where are they from, what do they do?

d. What are your impressions about this person?

e. How many times did you see this person?

f. Would you please share more about this experience? Did it last? (Elaborate.)

g. How does this date compare to other dates you've been on/people you've dated?

19. What are some things that you consider when deciding whether to date someone?

a. Why are these things important to you?

b. [If not mentioned] How important is race to you?

20. What role do you feel that race plays in your dating experiences?

a. Do you think that your race and physical appearance have an influence on how other people perceive you? Why?

b. Do you recall a conversation during a date where race came up? Would you please share with me? (Elaborate.)

c. Do you think that a person's race influences how you perceive that person? How so? (Elaborate.)

d. Have you ever been in a relationship with a person of a different race from you? How did you feel about it?

i. Why did you see that relationship as interracial?

ii. How did people perceive you as a couple?

iii. Why did you break up?

21. Have you ever found it difficult to try to date/contact certain types of people? How so?

22. How important is your family's opinion when it comes to whom you date? Could you give me some examples of how your family has reacted to people you've dated?

V. On-line Dating and OK Cupid

I am going to ask some more questions about your dating experiences, as well as your specific use of the website, OK Cupid:

23. How long have you had a profile on OK Cupid?

24. How did you learn about it? What did people tell you about it?

25. What led you to create a profile on OK Cupid?

26. How often do you change the information on your OK Cupid profile?

- **a.** Did you have a profile before moving to _____?
- **b.** Did you change your profile when you moved? How did you change it?
- **c.** What are some things you take into consideration when creating/updating your profile? When choosing your profile picture(s)?

27. Are there other dating websites that you use besides OK Cupid?

- **a.** How are these other websites similar to OK Cupid? How are they different?
- **b.** Is OK Cupid the primary website you use for on-line dating? Why?

28. Are there other experiences that have made you want to change parts of your profile?

- **a.** What happened?

29. Can you talk about/show me how you would look at someone's profile on OK Cupid?

- **a.** What is the first thing you look at?
- **b.** What characteristics are appealing? Which are not?
- **c.** If you like someone's profile, how do you approach them?

30. Do you use any filters on OK Cupid?

a. What filters do you use?

b. Why are these filters preferable to you?

c. How have these filters impacted your experience on-line?

31. How do other users approach you on OK Cupid?

32. What are some of the first things other users tend to mention when they message you?

33. When/how do you decide it is time to meet in person?

34. Would you say there are differences between how you feel and act while on OK Cupid versus how you feel and act when meeting someone in person?

a. Have there been moments where someone didn't meet your expectations?

b. What do you do when someone doesn't meet your expectations?

35. How many people have you met off of OK Cupid? From other websites?

a. What were these dates like?

36. Where are some other places you have met people to date?

a. Do these dates differ from ones that start on-line?

37. What advice would you give to a mixed-race woman about dating in _____?

38. What advice would you give to this same woman about how to navigate OK Cupid or other online dating websites?

VI. Interviewee's Reaction to Interview

39. Is there a question I did not ask you that you think would have been interesting, controversial, or difficult for you to be asked?

40. Is there a question that you found difficult to answer during this interview?

41. Is there something we did not discuss about race and dating that in your opinion would be important for you to share with me?

Appendix B: Interview Recruitment Message Script (via *OkCupid*)

Greetings!

My name is Shantel Buggs and I am a Ph.D. Candidate in the Sociology Department at The University of Texas at Austin. I am writing to see if you would be interested in participating in my dissertation research. I am interested in the dating experiences of multiracial/multiethnic women who use OkCupid, particularly how racial identity and family expectations impact their dating lives.

I feel that multiracial/multiethnic women have a unique experience while dating on-line and I hope to discover what multiracial/multiethnic women are encountering in their dating lives both on- and off-line.

Participation in my study would consist of at least an hour-long interview. If you would be interested in participating, please respond to this message.

Thanks,

Shantel

Appendix C: Interview Informed Consent

My name is Shantel G. Buggs and I am a Ph.D. Candidate in Sociology at The University of Texas at Austin. You are invited to participate in a research project that will contribute to my doctoral dissertation. This research is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Benjamin Carrington.

Your participation in my study is completely voluntary and you can choose to withdraw at any time without any penalty or loss of standing if you feel uncomfortable or simply no longer wish to participate. You may also refuse to answer any question.

The data I collect will be used to assist in my understanding of the experiences multiracial/multiethnic women have had in Texas while using the dating website OK Cupid. I aim to complete this research by June of 2016.

Participation in my study would require consent on several levels: consent to an interview, consent to audio recording of this interview, and consent to discuss your OK Cupid profile during the interview. You would be one of approximately 30 participants in my study. The interview would last at least one hour and would focus on your racial identity, your feelings about race and dating/marriage, and your dating experiences. Audio-recordings are specifically for the purpose of aiding me in recording data; they will be transcribed and the recordings will not be used for presentation or education-related purposes. Your identity will not be associated with any of the data I collect from your interview, as aliases will be utilized for my dissertation and interviews will be assigned ID numbers. Confidentiality of your participation will be maintained as far as possible within legal limits by keeping your consent separate from interview materials, which will only be identified by their ID numbers.

Please note that there are some emotional and/or psychological risks to participating in this study. Due to the nature of these questions focusing on racial identity, dating, and family expectations, it is possible that you may feel uncomfortable, upset, and/or stressed. If you become upset during the interview and are unwilling to continue, please know that you are completely within your rights to end the interview. If you feel the need to speak to someone, a referral to local counseling and psychological services can be made.

While you will not directly benefit from participation in this study, your participation will help me provide a clearer understanding of the dynamics of on-line dating. It is possible that this work might be published eventually in professional and/or scientific journals. It may also be used for educational purposes or for professional presentations. However, no individual subject will be identified.

This project has been reviewed by The University of Texas at Austin's Human Subjects Research Institutional Review Board; if you have any questions regarding your rights as a research subject, they may be addressed to the Office of Research Support (ORS) at (512) 471-8871.

Please indicate the level of participation you choose next to the appropriate items:
____ Consent for interview
____ Consent for audio recording of interview
____ Consent to discuss OK Cupid profile during interview

Subject Printed Name _____

Signature of Subject _____

Subject Rights

1. I understand that informed consent is required of all persons participating in this project.
2. All procedures have been explained to me and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.
3. Any risks and/or discomforts have been explained to me.
4. Any benefits have been explained to me.
5. I understand that, if I have any questions, I may contact Shantel G. Buggs at sgbuggs@utexas.edu. I may also contact Dr. Benjamin H. Carrington, faculty sponsor, at bhcarrington@austin.utexas.edu.
6. I have been told that I may refuse to participate or to stop my participation in this project at any time before or during the project. I may also refuse to answer any question.
7. ANY QUESTIONS REGARDING MY RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH SUBJECT MAY BE ADDRESSED TO THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN'S HUMAN SUBJECTS RESEARCH INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD AT THE OFFICE OF RESEARCH SUPPORT (ORS) AT (512) 71-8871. ALL RESEARCH PROJECTS THAT ARE CARRIED OUT BY INVESTIGATORS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS ARE GOVERNED BY REQUIREMENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY AND THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT.
8. All information that is obtained in connection with this project and that can be identified with me will remain confidential as far as possible within legal limits. Information gained from this study that can be identified with me may be released to no one other than the principal investigator and her faculty sponsor. The results may be published in scientific journals, professional publications, or educational presentations without identifying me by name.

I HAVE READ (OR HAVE HAD READ TO ME) THE CONTENTS OF THIS CONSENT FORM AND HAVE BEEN ENCOURAGED TO ASK QUESTIONS. I HAVE RECEIVED ANSWERS TO MY QUESTIONS. I GIVE MY CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY. I HAVE RECEIVED (OR WILL RECEIVE) A COPY OF THIS FORM FOR MY RECORDS AND FUTURE REFERENCE.

Please indicate you consent for participation in this project by signing your name below:

Subject Printed Name: _____

Signature of Subject: _____

Date: _____

I HAVE READ THIS FORM TO THE SUBJECT AND/OR THE SUBJECT HAS READ THIS FORM. AN EXPLANATION OF THE RESEARCH WAS GIVEN AND THE QUESTIONS FROM THE SUBJECT WERE SOLICITED AND ANSWERED TO THE SUBJECT'S SATISFACTION. IN MY JUDGMENT, THE SUBJECT HAS DEMONSTRATED COMPREHENSION OF THE INFORMATION.

Principal Investigator (PI): _____

Signature of PI: _____

Date: _____

Appendix D: Descriptive Characteristics of Respondents

Pseudonym	Age	Reported Racial Identity	Educational Attainment
Aidah	27	Bangladeshi (Pakistani and Iranian)	Bachelor's Degree
Allyson	27	Hapa/White and Filipino	Master's Degree
Anita	30	Black and Afro-Latina (Mexican, Tejano)	Bachelor's Degree
Audre	23	Black (Nigerian) and Creole/White	High School
Autumn	21	Black and White	Bachelor's Degree
Blair	27	Hispanic and White	Bachelor's Degree
Calla	36	Blaxican/Mexican and Black	Associate's Degree
Corinne	31	Korean and White	Bachelor's Degree
Desi	24	Spanish, Irish, and Native American	High School
Dominique	35	Other/Black and White	Bachelor's Degree
Gia	22	Hispanic/Mexican and Lebanese	Bachelor's Degree
India	24	Black and Asian (Filipino and Chinese)	Bachelor's Degree
Jacinta	24	Black and White	Bachelor's Degree
Jada	22	Black and Native American (Cherokee)	Associate's Degree
Janet	23	Black and European (Italian)	Bachelor's Degree
Kai	22	Black (Jamaican) and Asian (Vietnamese, Chinese)	Bachelor's Degree
Kaitlyn	28	White and Mexican	Master's Degree

Lark	24	Jewish and Native American	Master's Degree
Leilani	28	Black and Korean	Bachelor's Degree
Lorena	31	Chicana/White and Hispanic	Master's Degree
Makaela	35	Biracial/Black and White	Bachelor's Degree
Marie	26	Arab and White	Bachelor's Degree
Monique	18	American Black, White, Native American (Cherokee, Yemasee)	High School
Nicole	28	Native American (Cherokee) and White	Master's Degree
Nina	39	Latina/Black, Indigenous, White (European)	High School
Rahel	28	Other/Mexican and Persian	Bachelor's Degree
Samantha	26	Hispanic/Mexican, Native American, Pacific Islander	Associate's Degree
Shelby	25	White and Indian	Bachelor's Degree
Tiffany	22	Black and Chamorro	High School
Valerie	22	American Black, Trinidadian	Bachelor's Degree

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