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Cover Page Footnote

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LISTENING TO THE INTERRACIAL CANARY: CONTEMPORARY VIEWS ON INTERRACIAL RELATIONSHIPS AMONG BLACKS AND WHITES

Erica Chito Childs*

INTRODUCTION

In 1967, the award-winning film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, fresh on the heels of the much referenced U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Loving v. Virginia*,¹ wrestled with how an older white couple handled their daughter bringing home a black fiancé.² While the film ended with the white father offering his support, he lamented the “unimaginable opposition” that his white daughter and her black fiancé would face in the larger society. Fast forward to 2005, and mainstream popular films such as *Guess Who* and *Something New* paint a different picture of interracial relationships and societal responses, with black women dating white men to the chagrin of black families and communities.³ In *Guess Who*, whose title implies the connection to *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, the film offers a comedic take on a young black woman bringing her white fiancé home to her black family; however, the black family and community are now the ones with the problem. These two movies are noteworthy in that they reflect how interracial relationships are represented differently and raise the question of just how much the contemporary racial landscape and views on interracial marriage have changed.

In contemporary American society, black-white couples are often heralded as a sign that racial barriers have disappeared, and crossing racial borders is no longer taboo. In *Interracial Intimacies: Sex, Marriage, Identity, and Adoption*, Randall Kennedy argues, “Americans are becoming increasingly multiracial in their tastes, affections, and identities. The rates of interracial dating, marriage, and adoption are inching, and in some places rocketing, upward. This trend is, in my view, a positive good. It signals that formal and informal racial boundaries are fading.”⁴ Media reports also herald interracial marriage as a sign of racial progress and celebrate what

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1. 388 U.S. 1 (1967).

2. *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (Columbia Pictures 1967).

3. *Guess Who* (Columbia Pictures 2005); *Something New* (Gramercy Pictures 2006).

4. Randall Kennedy, *Interracial Intimacies: Sex, Marriage, Identity, and Adoption* 36–37 (2003).

they describe as an increasingly multiracial world. For example, in 2007 the Associated Press reported on the increase of interracial marriages, noting that “[c]oupled with a steady flow of immigrants from all parts of the world, the surge of interracial marriages and multiracial children is producing a 21st century America more diverse than ever, with the potential to become less stratified by race.”⁵

This colorblind approach has generated widespread acceptance, especially in the mainstream media, which often touts how the increasing number and acceptance of interracial marriages have altered the racial landscape, making race and racism barely visible. The idea that society is becoming colorblind or has already moved beyond race by not acknowledging race or refusing to “see” color is widely accepted as the dominant ideology in contemporary American society.⁶ While this colorblind optimism is quite common in news reports that tend to make headlines, inside most of these pieces, there is at least a footnote that contradicts the headline, describing some opposition and evidence against their colorblind argument. For example, in the middle of the 2007 Associated Press piece, a few paragraphs acknowledge that interracial couples do face opposition and even blame black families for a big part of this opposition. Yet these revelations do not change the celebratory tone of the piece.⁷ Looking at interracial relationships through a colorblind lens is problematic because it ignores, even disguises, the power and privilege that still characterize race relations in this country. Rather than approach interracial relationships as a sign of racial progress, I argue that the metaphor of the miner’s canary is more fitting.

In *The Miner’s Canary: Enlisting Race, Resisting Power, Transforming Power*, Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres use the metaphor of the miner’s canary to explain the experiences of racial minorities in society, which can expose the underlying problems that ultimately affect everyone, not just minorities. I argue that the experiences of black-white couples also can serve as a miner’s canary because they reveal racial problems that otherwise would remain hidden, especially to whites. By looking at the experiences of interracial couples and the ways communities respond to their relationships, we have a lens through which to understand contemporary

5. Associated Press, *After 40 Years, Interracial Marriage Flourishing*, MSNBC.com, Apr. 15, 2007, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18090277/>.

6. See, e.g., Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (2003); Leslie G. Carr, “Color-Blind” Racism (1997); Ellis Cose, *Color-Blind: Seeing Beyond Race in a Race-Obsessed World* (1997); Joe R. Feagin, *Racist America: Roots, Current Realities, and Future Reparations* (2000); Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (1993); Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992).

7. Associated Press, *supra* note 5.

race relations.⁸ Furthermore, the issues that interracial unions bring to the surface—such as racialized and sexualized stereotypes, perceptions of innate racial differences, familial opposition, and lack of community acceptance—are not individual problems but rather reflections of the larger racial issues that divide society. While interracial unions have simultaneously been heralded as a way to erase racial difference and as a sign of racial progress, they are also perceived as the ultimate problem of race relations: a symbol of racial impurity among whites or an internalization of racism among blacks. The ability of two individuals to love each other, even in growing numbers, cannot change the social structure of race in this country. However, the societal responses to these relationships do give us insight into the social and political hierarchy of race.

While interracial relationships have been a hotly debated topic, existing research rarely provides rich qualitative data on how whites and blacks view interracial relationships. Traditionally, works within the social sciences on interracial marriage have sought to identify the characteristics of individuals in interracial relationships, to account for the occurrence of interracial marriage, or to compare these unions to same-sex unions.⁹ Some studies that do look critically at societal responses do so through interviews with multiracial families.¹⁰ Other works provide extensive documentation of legal, political, and social barriers to interracial marriage and parenting, but do not rely on original qualitative data from white and black communities.¹¹

The larger cultural and sociopolitical meanings that black-white couplings have for whites and blacks tells us something not only about interracial relationships but also about underlying racial discourses and practices. Drawing from research I have conducted over the past eight years—qualitative interviews with black-white heterosexual couples and multiracial families, focus groups in white and black communities, and a comprehensive analysis of media and popular culture representations of interracial relationships—I present key findings about societal views and

8. Erica Chito Childs, *Navigating Interracial Borders: Black-White Couples and Their Social Worlds* 6 (2005); see Lani Guinier & Gerald Torres, *The Miner's Canary: Enlisting Race, Resisting Power, Transforming Democracy* 2–3 (2003).

9. See, e.g., James H. Gadberry & Richard A. Dodder, *Educational Homogamy in Interracial Marriages: An Update*, 8 *J. Soc. Behav. & Personality* 155 (1993); Tim B. Heaton & Cardell K. Jacobson, *Intergroup Marriage: An Examination of Opportunity Structures*, 70 *Soc. Inquiry* 30 (2000); Matthijs Kalmijn, *Trends in Black/White Inter-marriage*, 72 *Soc. Forces* 119 (1993); Robert K. Merton, *Inter-marriage and the Social Structure: Fact and Theory*, 4 *Psychiatry* 361 (1941).

10. For an excellent discussion of multiracial families, see Heather M. Dalmage, *Tripping on the Color-Line: Black-White Multiracial Families in a Racially Divided World* (2000) (interviewing multiracial families and discussing issues such as transracial adoption, census categories, and housing segregation).

11. See, e.g., Kennedy, *supra* note 4; Rachel F. Moran, *Interracial Intimacy: The Regulation of Race and Romance* (2001); Renee Romano, *Race-Mixing: Black-White Marriage in Postwar America* (2003).

responses to interracial relationships.¹² Using a critical race approach, I explore the dominant images and beliefs about black-white couplings and what the group responses to interracial relationships tell us about contemporary race relations. The stories that we tell and are told about interracial relationships are not singular accounts or examples but “social events that instruct us about social processes, social structures, and social situations.”¹³ Narrative in this context is important, as I pay particular attention to the discrepancies in what the respondents say, what they do not say, and what they actually do. For example, what does it mean when a white man says he “doesn’t have a problem with interracial relationships,” and is completely supportive of others marrying interracially but he would never do so because he does not find black women attractive? Would you say he is supportive, negative, or somewhere in between? In other words, is he tolerant or prejudiced, colorblind or racist? In what follows, I briefly address the dominant views of interracial relationships found among white and black families and communities, and then discuss the major themes that emerged from the research.

I. LITTLE WHITE LIES: WHITE VIEWS ON INTERRACIAL MARRIAGE

Certain patterns or themes emerged in the varied research I conducted with interracial couples, white families, and white communities. One pattern of response or, more accurately, lack of response was the way that whites were often silent or hesitant to speak about issues of race and interracial relationships, illustrating the relative lack of consideration this issue receives in white worlds. For example, most whites interviewed replied that they “had never really thought about it” and “didn’t know it was an issue,” when asked about interracial relationships.¹⁴ These responses could be read as strategic moves to avoid discussing the issue by claiming ignorance, for fear of saying something wrong or being perceived as racist, since whites often view the new racial climate as discouraging the open expressions of racial views.¹⁵ Yet these whites may have truly never thought about the issue, since their families and social worlds were predominantly, if not exclusively, white. Whatever the reason, the white people I interviewed did not view interracial relationships as an issue or concern that they wanted or needed to talk about.¹⁶ This was not necessarily because they were supportive but because interracial

12. I interviewed black-white couples as well as white and black communities at colleges and churches, and conducted cultural analyses of media and popular culture from 1999 to 2002, which is described in great detail in Chito Childs, *supra* note 8, at 11–17, 206–10; see also Erica Chito Childs, *Fade to Black and White: Interracial Images in America* (forthcoming 2008) (discussing the research methods used).

13. Adalberto Aguirre, Jr., *Academic Storytelling: A Critical Race Theory Story of Affirmative Action*, 43 *Soc. Persp.* 319, 320 (2000).

14. Chito Childs, *supra* note 8, at 49–53.

15. *Id.* at 49.

16. *Id.*

relationships in particular, and blacks in general, were not part of their social worlds.

Yet when pressed to discuss their views on interracial relationships, particularly for themselves or those close to them, very similar responses emerged, including the use of certain words and phrases. The socially shared knowledge of groups about the rules and conventions of acceptable behavior in these specific situations often works like a "script," which is culturally defined and managed according to cultural norms and expectations.¹⁷ When asked to comment on their own views of interracial relationships involving themselves or their families, the most common response among the whites interviewed was "I don't have a problem with interracial couples but . . ." followed by an explanation of reasons why interracial relationships do not work and should not happen.¹⁸ In all the group interviews, what began as the white respondents not having a problem with interracial relationships became a dialogue on the reasons why these relationships do not happen and do not work. Though most whites interviewed stated that they did not have a problem with interracial relationships, it was not something they would do or want those close to them to do. For example, one white woman in her forties stated she did not have any problems with interracial relationships, describing it as "*their* choice, *their* life, if that's what makes *them* happy."¹⁹ Another woman stated that she "celebrated those who had the courage to date interracial," saying "I think it's great."²⁰ While talking, she held her arm out and pointed into the distance, symbolically placing the couples outside her realm.²¹ This sentiment was echoed by others and reflects the ways that interracial relationships are perceived as something that happens to someone else, somewhere else.

Even white college students who said their parents did not care if they dated interracial clearly indicated that their families prefer, or in some cases demand, that they marry within their race. Within each of these responses, emphasis was placed on how *they* did not have a problem with interracial unions, and how *they* did not think there was "anything wrong" with blacks, often using certain language like "I don't care if someone is red, blue, black or green."²² Based on these statements, interracial relationships in particular and blacks in general are outside these white groups' social worlds. As Erving Goffman argued, speech works as a "move in a game" that signifies more than the simple meaning of the words: for example, when whites state they personally would not marry

17. See Philomena Essed, *Understanding Everyday Racism: An Interdisciplinary Theory* 63–64 (1991); see also Chito Childs, *supra* note 8, at 73.

18. Chito Childs, *supra* note 8, at 50–53, 146–51.

19. *Id.* at 51.

20. *Id.* at 146.

21. *Id.* at 73–74, 110–13, 146–51.

22. *Id.* at 73, 117.

interracially but do not care if others do, they are still reproducing their racial group and the boundaries that separate white and black.²³

When speaking about their own dating choices, white college students explained their decisions not to date interracially as based on personal preference; not being attracted to blacks; a lack of common interests, different cultures, values, and beliefs; or the way they grew up. However, they denied racial preference.²⁴ White students discussed their reasons for not dating interracially, rationalizing that it is not traditional or not their personal preference.²⁵ In making these statements, they were drawing on norms and rules of race relations into which they were socialized by their family and group, yet they did not see it that way. These white college students did not believe that they *chose* not to interact with blacks but that it occurred naturally or as a result of the black students' actions. The belief among whites that they would have nothing in common with a black individual conveys the idea that whites and blacks are inherently different. The issue of physical attraction is also raised, but the color component is ignored, acting as if a preference for blondes is the same as an aversion to African Americans, and possibly black skin in general. White students often expressed support for interracial dating and marriage in general, stating they did not care if someone was white, black, red, blue, or green, yet they chose to associate exclusively with other whites. These statements reflect a colorblind discourse that is dominant in American society, where it is considered polite to "ignore" color or racial differences, without abandoning various prejudices and racialized ways of thinking.

The invisibility of whiteness and the existence of white privilege are key concepts to understanding why many members of the white community oppose interracial unions: whiteness is seen as essentially different from blackness, with whiteness being the standard by which all others are judged inferior. While it is considered socially unacceptable to say one is opposed to others' interracial relationships, it was perfectly acceptable to state that one personally would never date a black person and did not find black people attractive.

While the white respondents adamantly stated that they personally did not have a problem, they readily discussed how others in society were opposed to interracial unions; therefore, they would not think it would be a good idea.²⁶ Most whites employed a discourse of interracial unions as unnatural, nontraditional, or otherwise uncomfortable. This was illustrated in the common ideas about interracial relationships that dominated the couples' narratives, communities' statements, and popular cultural images. Race or racial difference was rarely discussed; instead, other reasons and explanations were given, and these responses were remarkably similar. For

23. See generally Erving Goffman, *Forms of Talk* (1981).

24. Chito Childs, *supra* note 8, at 139–68.

25. *Id.* at 147.

26. *Id.* at 51–55.

example, couples discussed how others were concerned about how “society” would respond to the issue of “the children,” or in general the “difficulty” of being with someone of a different race.²⁷ These same issues also figured prominently in the communities’ reasons for questioning interracial relationships. By emphasizing the existence of anonymous societal opposition the respondents avoided discussing their own views and did not have to acknowledge their own role in the opposition they said existed. Most whites explicitly stated they did not harbor negative views of African Americans, yet they also recounted reasons why African Americans were not suitable mates, or at least why white-black relationships did not work.

Furthermore, negative comments by others were rarely challenged. For example, among the white church members, one woman asked the group if they would marry a black person, referring to blacks as “one of ‘them.’”²⁸ Another woman answered her while the other whites remained silent, with no one expressing outrage, disgust, or surprise.²⁹ The group’s responses to the woman’s question can be understood as “the nature of the group,” or in other words, how individuals act in a manner appropriate to the group.³⁰ Similarly, in one of the groups of white college students, a young male interrupted a discussion of his peers on how parents may feel if they brought home a black partner in polite colorblind terms, and he interjected, “Are you kidding me? [My] parents would shit, they’d have a freaking heart attack.”³¹ He dramatically grabbed the front of his shirt and imitated a dying father’s voice, “Uhh, son, how could you do this to us, the family?”³² This student’s use of humor is an interesting discursive strategy. Although he presents it as a joke and the other students laugh, no one disagrees. In a group context, well-meaning whites often remain silent when others are making a racist joke or engaging in a prejudicial action. Regardless of whether the other whites agreed with these statements, their decision not to address or confront these questions and jokes allows that type of “racialized” thinking to go unchallenged.

Like manifestations of contemporary racism, the opposition to interracial unions is subtle and often not readily apparent because it is articulated in individual terms: for example, individuals will say “I do not have a problem with interracial couples, but *I* wouldn’t date outside my race.” The oppositional discourse among close social networks is usually expressed in colorblind terms, emphasizing problems that interracial couples may face in society instead of their personal views. These responses could be described as part of a shift from blatant bigotry and overt demands for strict segregation and discrimination to a “laissez-faire racism” characterized by

27. *Id.* at 44–74, 129–38, 145–51.

28. *Id.* at 50.

29. *Id.*

30. *Id.* at 50–51.

31. *Id.* at 112

32. *Id.*

“whites’ comfort with and acceptance of persistent racial inequality, discrimination, and exploitation.”³³ Whites may speak out against discrimination and advocate equality on a broad theoretical level, yet oppose implementing practices that require day-to-day interaction with or close proximity to African Americans in their social circle.³⁴

Drawing on Herbert Blumer’s work,³⁵ Lawrence Bobo and Ryan Smith argue that “racial attitudes capture preferred group positions and those patterns of belief and feeling that undergird, justify and make understandable a preference for relatively little group differentiation and inequality under some social conditions or for a great deal of differentiation and inequality under others.”³⁶ Therefore, it is not surprising that whites, like the students and church members, may state that they do not view blacks negatively, but they “prefer” not to interact with blacks on a personal, especially intimate, level. As Joe Feagin posits, whites may harbor racist images and attitudes, but not express them openly.³⁷ While color is described as insignificant (in statements about not caring if someone is “purple, yellow, black whatever”), Patricia J. Williams argues that the very reason people make these types of statements is because skin color and race do matter, often most to those who espouse this colorblind discourse.³⁸ The whites interviewed offered what I call “supportive opposition,” where they claimed they did not have a problem with interracial relationships but then actively expressed reasons why they (and those close to them) would not, could not, and should not be involved interracially.

II. THE TROUBLE WITH INTERRACIAL RELATIONSHIPS: BLACK VIEWS ON INTERRACIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Whereas the white communities interviewed about interracial relationships were initially silent on the issue, the black individuals and communities I interviewed were immediately very vocal on the issue and engaged in long and heated discussions about the topic. While the white respondents claimed that they accepted interracial relationships but then described the problems they had with these unions, the black respondents were more likely to report that they did have a problem with interracial relationships in theory, yet they went on to list various interracial couples among their families and friends who they loved and accepted. For the

33. Lawrence D. Bobo & Ryan A. Smith, *From Jim Crow to Laissez-Faire Racism: The Transformation of Racial Attitudes*, in *Beyond Pluralism: The Conception of Groups and Group Identities in America 182, 186* (Wendy Katkin, Ned Landsman & Andrea Tyree eds., 1998).

34. *See id.*

35. Herbert Blumer, *Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position*, 1 *Pac. Soc. Rev.* 3 (1958).

36. Bobo & Smith, *supra* note 33, at 210.

37. Feagin, *supra* note 6, at 122.

38. *See generally* Patricia J. Williams, *Seeing a Color-Blind Future: The Paradox of Race* (1997).

black respondents, interracial relationships were an issue that they had thought about and discussed, something they felt was a concern for black families and communities.

Most black respondents reported that they did not care if others chose to engage in interracial relationships,³⁹ yet these unions “rubbed (them) the wrong way.”⁴⁰ Among the black respondents, interracial relationships were seen as problematic for different reasons than those expressed by white respondents. A number of black respondents, particularly women, reported that seeing a black man with a white woman concerned them. One woman stated, “I don’t let myself get bothered by it, but I just say there’s just more in common with your own race.”⁴¹ She went on to say that one of her best friends is married to a white man and she would never tell them she had any negative views on interracial relationships.⁴² Unlike the white respondents, the black respondents did not see interracial dating as outside of the realm of possibility; rather, it was discussed as “something that did occur but often had negative implications, even deleterious consequences.”⁴³

Black respondents discussed interracial relationships within the context of their experiences with racism and discrimination. For example, one mother in her fifties said she wanted her daughter to find “a black husband” because she does not want her daughter to get hurt and “go over to that other group that don’t want [her] anyways.”⁴⁴ Most respondents agreed that it was acceptable, even at times necessary, to discourage loved ones from becoming involved interracially.⁴⁵ As Patricia Hill Collins argues in *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, “Norms of racial solidarity . . . posit that African American men and women should support one another in every way,”⁴⁶ identifying marrying within one’s race as “an important African American community norm.”⁴⁷ Similarly, according to the black individuals I interviewed

choosing to date or marry interracially is frowned upon because it is seen as an effect of white domination and the internalization by black people of a complex and debilitating prejudice and self-hatred against themselves that makes them perceive whites as superior, and that by associating with whites they can elevate their position.⁴⁸

Black respondents also discussed what interracial relationships meant to them. They questioned the motives of those involved in these relationships

39. See Chito Childs, *supra* note 8, at 77–82.

40. Confidential interview with twenty-something black Baptist woman, in New York, N.Y. (May 2000).

41. Chito Childs, *supra* note 8, at 80.

42. *Id.*

43. *Id.* at 81.

44. *Id.* at 80.

45. *Id.*

46. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* 262 (2004).

47. *Id.* at 264; see Chito Childs, *supra* note 8, at 80.

48. Chito Childs, *supra* note 8, at 80.

and the sincerity of the white partner. They offered various examples of how whites mistreat blacks in general, connecting this to the probability that a white individual would use a racial slur, disrespect the black partner, and simply not understand what it means to be "black in America."⁴⁹

In group interviews, black college students raised the idea that black men seek out white women for very specific purposes, including sex, money, and assistance with things like homework and laundry.⁵⁰ Interracial couples also recounted their experiences where others have assumed their relationships were sexual, financially motivated, or otherwise not real.⁵¹ Many black partners also report that they have been accused of "selling out" or turning their backs on their community, and some even discuss having struggled with feeling that way about themselves.⁵² The respondents I interviewed noted that black communities can view interracial relationships as a sign that one lacks pride and is removed from black people and relevant issues.⁵³ More importantly, these relationships are understood to signal a negative image of oneself as a black person and a devaluation of blackness.⁵⁴ Blacks who cross the color line are often accused of selling out their blackness for a white ideal. These images of black-white unions based on sex, curiosity, financial motives, or a devaluation of self are also reinforced in media and popular culture.⁵⁵ Among the black community respondents, an integral part of the sellout image revolves around the issue of class. They paid particular attention to the idea that successful black men choose white women, not only because of the larger numbers of black men versus black women who date interracially, but also due to the underlying reasons given for this discrepancy. The black respondents, particularly the black women, attributed the gender differences to both opportunity and choice. They cited that black men want "white skin, long hair," noted that white women are readily available to black men, and believed that white men are not interested in dating black women.⁵⁶

The central concern that emerged from the research with black individuals, families, and communities was that interracial relationships are particularly unacceptable for oneself and one's family because of lingering racism, which prevents whites and blacks from being able to come together. In general, there is a sense that interracial relationships are problematic, as

49. *Id.* at 82–83.

50. Erica Chito Childs, *Looking Behind the Stereotypes of the "Angry Black Woman": An Exploration of Black Women's Responses to Interracial Relationships*, 19 *Gender & Soc'y* 544, 552 (2005).

51. Chito Childs, *supra* note 8, at 67–69, 82–87, 154–57.

52. *Id.* at 87–95.

53. *Id.*

54. *Id.* at 87.

55. *See id.* at 70–73, 83–84, 88–90, 99, 163–81 (discussing film and Internet representations); Chito Childs, *supra* note 12 (providing an in-depth critical analysis of all media and popular culture representations of interracial sex and relationships).

56. *See* Chito Childs, *supra* note 8, at 98–99, 160–61; Chito Childs, *supra* note 50, at 551–54.

well as apprehension about how whites will treat the black partner and how the biracial children will fare in this racially divided world. I argue that blacks express what I call “oppositional support,” because while offering many reasons why they distrust and discourage interracial relationships, they also acknowledge loving and accepting many interracial couples among their families and friends.

III. REGULATING GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND THE CONTINUING SIGNIFICANCE OF MARRIAGE

While both whites and blacks express some level of opposition towards interracial relationships, the underlying bases of this opposition seem to be significantly different. The research with both whites and blacks on their views on interracial relationships highlights the importance of gender, norms of sexuality, and the significance of marriage.

Gender matters, and historically has mattered, in a number of ways. “People imagine and respond to interracial unions differently depending on whether they involve a black man with a white woman or a black woman with a white man.”⁵⁷ Historically, whites focused on preventing black men from having any intimate contact with white women while black women were routinely sexually abused by white men. Black men and women have fought to be free from racial subordination and oppression, yet the connection to interracial sex is markedly different for black men and women. For black women, racial equality included an escape from the interracial sexual exploitation of white men; for black men, racial equality included an escape from the lynching and abuse that surrounded real or alleged interracial sexual relations with white women. Contemporary responses to interracial relationships in both white and black communities still focus more on the black man-white woman coupling, but for very different reasons.

According to the white communities I interviewed, relationships between white women and black men still seem to be the most problematic—not surprising in a society dominated by a white male power structure.⁵⁸ The different intersections of race, gender, and sexuality are clear in contemporary popular films such as *One Night Stand*,⁵⁹ *Jungle Fever*,⁶⁰ *Freeway*,⁶¹ and *Thirteen*,⁶² in which being a “good” white woman does not include dating or having sex with a black man. A white woman involved with a black man is viewed as tainted and less desirable, while a white man involved with a black woman is not lessened, and is possibly even seen as having enhanced sexual prowess. For example,

57. Chito Childs, *supra* note 8, at 157.

58. *Id.* at 157.

59. *One Night Stand* (New Line Cinema 1997).

60. *Jungle Fever* (40 Acres & A Mule Filmworks 1991).

61. *Freeway* (August Entertainment 1996).

62. *Thirteen* (Michael London Productions 2003).

one of the white college students discussed how her family would never accept it if she married a black man, even though her brother was married to a black woman. Also, among white college students black men were seen as lazy, unfaithful, and even criminal. The only statements made about white men with black women were that white men found black women "unattractive."⁶³

Within the black communities, the opposing images of black women and white women has a historical basis, although it has changed slightly. Historically, "[w]hite women were put on a pedestal as the symbol of femininity, beauty, and purity for all men, while black women were seen as strong, overpowering, physically unappealing, and sexually promiscuous."⁶⁴ Among the black college students, contemporary ideas about differences between white and black women were discussed. Some participants argued that black men think that "white girls are easier, sexually loose, and, on the flipside, that black women are too aggressive, too controlling, have an attitude, not confident, but nasty, gold-digger."⁶⁵ This imagery differs from "the historical construction of the white woman as the virgin and the black woman as the whore, yet the same purpose is served."⁶⁶ Within the women's discussions, the white women are perceived as sexually loose and easy, yet this only enhances their desirability. Characterizing white women and black women as being in complete opposition to one another highlights the idea of racial difference: white women are viewed as the standard of femininity in terms of both physical appearance and personal characteristics such as submissiveness.⁶⁷ Therefore, according to the black respondents, when a black man chooses a white partner it is not only viewed as the loss of a potential partner for black women, but it is also read as an internalization of racism and the Eurocentric standards of beauty, leaving black women less opportunity to date interracially.

While black men date interracially more frequently than black women, interracial marriage rates between blacks and whites remain extremely low. Even if there is an increasing visibility of interracial couples, especially among young people, according to the white and black respondents, there is a significant difference between interracial dating and interracial marriage.⁶⁸ The increased visibility of, and engagement in, black-white sexual relations signals neither racial progress nor lasting relationships, but possibly a fad. Although interracial dating may be marginally tolerated or even acceptable on college campuses or in society, the idea of interracial marriage is still much more problematic for both whites and blacks.⁶⁹ "The

63. Chito Childs, *supra* note 8, at 157.

64. *Id.* at 159.

65. *Id.*; Chito Childs, *supra* note 50, at 552-53.

66. Chito Childs, *supra* note 50, at 553.

67. *Id.*

68. Chito Childs, *supra* note 8, at 156.

69. *Id.*

college students, both black and white, discussed how marriage across racial lines was unacceptable to their parents, even if interracial dating was allowed."⁷⁰ Some couples discussed how interracial dating is often viewed as trendy, and a number of black students even described interracial dating as a rite of passage or trend, especially between black men and white women.⁷¹

The importance of the institution of marriage is clear.

Within the long and complex history of "race relations," marriage rules and laws (informal and formal) can be seen as extensions of white political supremacy. Legal interracial marriages and their biracial offspring obviously threaten the white power structure by threatening, among other things, to "mongrelize" white families, communities, and even the white race. Many blacks, however, also object to interracial marriage and white members in their families and communities. Even worse is the idea of losing a black individual to the white community. The [interracial] couples discussed priests who opposed their marriage, friends or community members who expressed surprise or disgust at their marriage, and appalled strangers who attended the wedding.

... [T]his society, where group membership is all-important and identity is based primarily on one's racial group, would object to individuals from different "racial" groups redefining themselves apart from their racial identities. Since marriage between a black and a white individual has traditionally been seen as a symbol of the full assimilation of blacks into American society, . . . then their occurrence could result in them becoming more accepted and thus less deviant from society's norms, unless groups and communities respond in a way to discourage the practice. Therefore, groups tend to "monitor" the identity of each member's marriage partner to ensure that it is matched and perceived by others as being conjoined with the identity of the member. One recent study found that people are more likely to live with a partner of a different race than to marry them, "consistent with the [belief] that cohabitations represent a less formal union, and thus [is] often entered into with people who are not suitable for marriage."⁷² A mere transgression is tolerated or even hoped for, but a violation of the "sacred institution" of marriage and family is less tolerable.⁷³

Regulating sexual relationships by preventing or discouraging marriage through legal means or societal pressure constructs interracial relationships as deviant.⁷⁴ In many ways, black-white couples still exist on the margins. "Beliefs about gender, sexuality, and race not only coexist; they are articulated in relation to and through one another. Like gay/lesbian relationships, interracial relationships have historically been constructed as

70. *Id.*

71. *Id.* at 154–57.

72. Rebecca Gardyn, *Love Is Colorblind . . . or Is It?*, *Am. Demographics*, June 2000, at 11, 11–12.

73. Chito Childs, *supra* note 8, at 156–57.

74. *Id.* at 191.

inherently sexual and, more important, as sexually deviant.”⁷⁵ The similarities between opposition to interracial sexual relationships and opposition to homosexuality are striking: the ban on marriage, the criminalization of sexual acts, and the familial responses.⁷⁶ In this research, though my focus was on heterosexual interracial couples, the connection between interracial relationships and societal norms of sexuality is illustrated in the ways that interracial couples are discussed in comparison to gay/lesbian couples. “Discourses against interracial sexuality and homosexuality, however, are often intertwined, since both deviate from the same-race, heterosexual norms of sexuality that exist.”⁷⁷ Interracial couples I interviewed observed that others often saw their relationships, along with bisexuality, as cool trends on college campuses.⁷⁸ One black woman respondent stated that her mother told her she would “rather her be a lesbian than marry a white man.”⁷⁹ Furthermore, an Internet search of the phrase “interracial couple” yielded primarily pornographic web sites where interracial sex is presented as a fetish to be watched, like other sexual acts that are also considered deviant.⁸⁰ These examples illustrate the ways that both interracial sexuality and homosexuality are produced and reproduced as outside the desired norm.

CONCLUSION: THE INTERRACIAL CANARY

Like the miner’s canary that warns of a poisonous atmosphere, black-white couples expose lingering racism, prejudice, and segregation in society. The discourse of opposition—whether coded in colorblind language or expressed outright—mirrors the contemporary prejudices and racism that plague our society. The opposition to interracial unions is based within a social structure organized around the idea of separate racial groups and the ideology that there are distinct differences between the races. Whites have produced this racial hierarchy and maintain it through continued separation, with a collective discourse against interracial unions being part of this. While race undoubtedly plays a major role in the structure and interaction of groups in society, it is becoming increasingly popular to emphasize the declining significance of race, or not to see it or acknowledge it at all. The power of these racialized discourses is illustrated by the narratives of whites and blacks on interracial unions, as well as the ways black-white couples discuss their experiences. For example, most white community members stated that they had no problem with interracial relationships, yet their actions did not reflect their words. The “unimaginable opposition” cited in *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* in 1967 may not have disappeared, but it has been coded within a colorblind

75. *Id.*

76. *Id.* at 191–92.

77. *Id.* at 191.

78. *See id.*

79. *Id.*

80. *See id.* at 169–81 (discussing the Internet).

discourse that allows whites to argue that race no longer matters. At the same time, the focus on black opposition to interracial relationships depicted in contemporary films like *Guess Who* and *Something New* reflects some of the views discussed among black community members, but also distorts the contemporary racial landscape. It allows white individuals and communities like the ones interviewed to claim they are not the ones who have the problem with interracial relationships and are not racist, all the while maintaining the color line and reproducing racialized views and behaviors. Responses to interracial relationships are complex, and there is a discrepancy between people's words and their actions. Whites offered a "supportive opposition" by stressing their acceptance of interracial couples while living in predominantly white social worlds and expressing numerous reasons they opposed interracial unions. In contrast, the black responses can be characterized as "oppositional support," where they stressed the problems they had with interracial dating in general, yet loved and accepted interracial couples among their family and friends.

Although white and black opposition was expressed differently and based on different reasons, the persistence of white racism underlies both. While my research has looked specifically at interracial relationships, my findings reveal how common racialized thinking and racist beliefs are among white communities; otherwise, whites would not be opposed to interracial marriage. In particular, the idea of having a black person in the family would not be viewed as unnatural if blacks were not viewed as fundamentally different and less desirable. Coupled with the low rates of interracial marriage between blacks and whites, the white responses demonstrate that interracial marriage is not the norm. Interracial marriage is not widely accepted in black communities either; interestingly, white racism also underlies the opposition of blacks to interracial relationships. According to the black respondents, their opposition is based both in the painful legacy of racism and their own contemporary experiences of discrimination and racism. Furthermore, interracial relationships are seen as arising from a devaluation of black culture and internalization of white racism. This further weakens the black community in a number of ways, such as losing successful black men who marry interracially and the increasing trend for children of black-white couples to identify as multiracial rather than black—for example, golf celebrity Tiger Woods. While interracial relationships initially may be questioned and the white partner not trusted, interracial couples, especially if they are perceived to be genuine loving relationships, are ultimately accepted in black communities. In white communities, it is less likely that the black partner or interracial couples will be completely embraced since the white opposition is based in beliefs of inferiority and difference, rather than lack of trust. While whites, in particular, present their choices not to intermarry as nonracial and individual, this collective opposition to interracial marriage is part of the larger structure of institutionalized racism.

Though laws banning interracial marriage were struck down by the Supreme Court in 1967,⁸¹ whites (and blacks) still draw upon certain images and ideas about black-white unions to discourage the occurrence of these relationships. Through the racialized words and actions of others regarding interracial relationships, it is clear that race still divides us. The basis for white and black opposition affects not only interaction between blacks and whites but also the social, economic, and political realms. The same ideologies that make whites prefer not to marry interracially and make blacks view interracial marriage as a self-internalization of racism form the basis of racial inequality. If an individual finds the idea of a relationship with a person of another race unnatural, undesirable, or unacceptable, can it really be assumed that this does not affect how they view members of that race in other areas such as the workplace, neighborhood, or in political office? For these reasons, it is essential that we continue exploring the intersections of race and black-white intimacy.

81. *Loving v. Virginia*, 388 U.S. 1 (1967).