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# ***LOOKING BEHIND THE STEREOTYPES OF THE “ANGRY BLACK WOMAN” An Exploration of Black Women’s Responses to Interracial Relationships***

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*In academic research on interracial relationships, as well as popular discourses such as film and television, Black women are often characterized as angry and opposed to interracial relationships. Yet the voices of Black women have been largely neglected. Drawing from focus group interviews with Black college women and in-depth interviews with Black women who are married interracially, the author explores Black women’s views on Black-white heterosexual relationships. Black women’s opposition to interracial dating is not simply rooted in jealousy and anger toward white women but is based on white racism, Black internalization of racism, and what interracial relationships represent to Black women and signify about Black women’s worth. The impact of racism and sexism are clear, with Black women devalued by white standards of beauty and faced with a shortage of available Black men and a lack of “substantive opportunities” to date interracially.*

**Keywords:** *interracial marriage; racism; heterosexual relationships*

According to the 2000 Census, interracial marriages account for only 1.9 percent of all marriages. The overwhelming majority of these marriages are white-Asian couplings (1.2 percent), while marriages between Blacks and whites still remain least common (0.06 percent). As Rockquemore and Brunson (2001, ix) argued, “Blacks and whites continue to be the two groups with the greatest social distance, the most spatial separation, and the strongest taboos against interracial marriage.” Previous research has also documented that white-Black interracial couples are viewed more negatively than other racial combinations (Davis 1991; Feagin 2000; Ferber 1998; Frankenberg 1993; Rosenblatt, Karis, and Powell 1995).

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While the issue of interracial heterosexual relationships between Blacks and whites has been explored from many viewpoints, the voices of African American women have been largely neglected. Research has documented that Black women represent the strongest opposition toward interracial dating and marriage, based on qualitative research with Black men–white women interracial couples (McNamara, Tempenis, and Walton 1999; Rosenblatt, Karis, and Powell 1995; Spickard 1989) and quantitative survey data of white and Black attitudes toward interracial dating (Davis and Smith 1991; See 1989; Todd et al. 1992). However, an in-depth exploration of African American women's perspectives on heterosexual interracial relationships (both those who are interracially married and those who are not) will undoubtedly provide a better understanding of this phenomenon. Therefore, in this article, I will look specifically at the unique ways that African American women respond to Black-white heterosexual relationships and what their responses tell us about racial and gender dynamics in intimate relationships.

Since interracial sexuality (or even the possibility of its occurring) has played a central role in the treatment of Blacks in society, there is a painful and complicated history attached to Black-white unions in Black communities. For example, at the same time slavery was being legally institutionalized in Virginia in the mid to late 1600s, interracial unions were prohibited by law. While white women and Black men were severely punished for engaging in sexual relations, the much more common sexual exploitation of Black women by white men was routine and rarely punished (Davis 1981; Giddings 1984; Takaki 1993). The racial hierarchy and, more specifically, the white male power structure were not threatened by a Black woman's giving birth to a child by a white man. It has even been argued that this was economically beneficial because it served to increase the slave labor force (Collins 2004; Davis 1981; Davis 1991; Giddings 1984). In contrast, a white woman who gave birth to a child from a Black man would pollute the purity of the white race, thereby eroding racial boundaries and, most important, the power of white men.

Interracial relationships and marriage remain a politicized social issue in Black communities. The majority of Black-white relationships involve a Black man and white woman: For example, in 1992, there were 246,000 Black-white marriages, and 163,000 of these were between Black men and white women (<http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/race/interractab1.txt>). As Collins pointed out, "Black women remain called upon to accept and love the mixed-race children born to their brothers, friends and relatives . . . who at the same time often represent tangible reminders of their own rejection" (2000, 165). To Black women, interracial relationships between Black men and white women and their children represent rejection because these relationships, along with incarceration, drug abuse, and homicide, are viewed as the source of the shortage of marriable Black men (Collins 2004; Dickson 1993). This shortage of "good" Black men and the low rates of interracial marriage for Black women are important demographic realities to consider as we look at the views of Black women on interracial relationships.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditionally, works in the social sciences on interracial relationships have focused on the couple, seeking to explain how or why they came together, to evaluate the characteristics of the couples by looking at their demographic similarities and differences, or to compare these unions to same-race unions (Davis 1941; Gaines et al. 1999; Heaton and Jacobson 2000; Kalmijin 1998; Lewis, Yancey, and Bletzer 1997; Monahan 1970; Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan 1990; Yancey 2002). There are also a number of in-depth qualitative studies of interracial couples, which focus on the views of the couples, their experiences, and their relationships with family and community, documenting the difficulties these couples face from others and the ways they maintain a relationship despite these difficulties (McNamara, Tempenis, and Walton 1999; Root 2001; Rosenblatt, Karis, and Powell 1995). Some studies do move beyond looking simply at the couples to explore societal responses and the larger implications of interracial relationships. For example, Dalmage (2000) interviewed interracial couples and multiracial individuals about the ways in which their identities, politics, and communities both shape and are shaped by the color line, within a discussion of other issues such as census categories, transracial adoption, and housing segregation. Kennedy (2003), Moran (2001), and Romano (2003) documented the legal, political, and social barriers to interracial marriage, exploring how racial intimacy has shaped and in turn has been affected by laws and customs in the United States. Chito Childs (2005) looked at the experiences of interracial couples, the societal responses of white and Black families and communities, and popular culture depictions to argue that opposition still exists to interracial couples, and these relationships can be used to understand the current state of race relations. While these studies are all important for their documentation of the experiences of interracial couples and general societal responses, none look specifically and in depth at Black women's views and experiences with interracial relationships.

When Black women are discussed in these studies of interracial couples, they are often depicted as angry and opposed to interracial relationships. Quantitative survey research on attitudes toward interracial dating and marriage has found that Black women have the least favorable attitudes (Davis and Smith 1991; See 1989; Todd et al. 1992). Qualitative studies of interracial couples also often emphasize the image of the "angry Black woman" (McNamara, Tempenis, and Walton 1999; Rosenblatt, Karis, and Powell 1995), based primarily on the narratives of Black men-white women couples. For example, in Rosenblatt, Karis, and Powell's study, Christine, a white woman involved with a Black man, described her resentment at the way Black women she encounters routinely treat her: "The other thing that's happened recently for me that I think he (her Black partner) thinks is funny, but I've gotten kind of angry about Black women and how rejecting they are of us and how hostile many of them are" (1995, 153). Often, the opposition of Black women is characterized as personal, and there is little acknowledgment or concern for the larger issues that may be the root of Black women's perceived anger and hostility.

What is most problematic is that the voices of Black women are rarely included in the discussion.

Studies that have explored the issue of interracial unions and gender have focused on the experiences and views of white women. Jones (1990), Lazzarre (1996), and Reddy (1994) have all written from a personal perspective about their lives as white women married to Black men raising biracial Black children, describing their experiences using feminist theory and literary studies. Frankenberg (1993) also explored white women's views on and experiences with interracial relationships as one of the ways that white women socially construct their racial identities. She examined how white women's views on race are influenced by their involvement in intimate interracial relationships and the different discursive strategies of race cognizance or color-power evasiveness that they employ.

While very little qualitative research has been conducted to explore the particular experiences and views of Black women on interracial dating and marriage, there are important exceptions to this invisibility. Collins (2004, 263) addressed how "African American women's race and gender classification disadvantages them," with a shortage of marriable Black men and limited "substantive opportunities" to date interracially. She critiques researchers such as Root (2001), who celebrate interracial relationships as revolutionary, leaving "Black women who roll their eyes at interracial couples not seen as sympathetic figures—they become recast as familiar stereotypical Black bitches who stand in the way of progress" (Collins 2004, 263). bell hooks (1981, 1996, 2001) wrote of the difficulties Black women face in finding love in a racist, patriarchal society and offered a feminist critique of Black-white relationships. Other scholars draw on personal experiences, for example, Williams (1995), who discussed her family history and the legacy of miscegenation through an account of her grandmother who was a slave and bore children by her white slave master. Black women's views on interracial lesbian relationships have been addressed by Lorde (1984), who described her own experiences as part of an interracial lesbian couple raising a son, and by other Black feminist scholars such as Jordan (1992), Pellegrini (1997), and Smith (1998), who looked at Black women's experiences and the intersection of not only race and gender but also sexuality.

Related research on the issue of Black women, appearance, and the marriage market is also important to consider. As Toni Morrison (1972) wrote in *The Bluest Eye*, there are "devastating effect(s) of pervasive European ideals of beauty on the self image of Black women." Skin color stratification exists in the Black community as well as the larger society, where light-skinned Blacks are evaluated as more attractive and more successful in terms of education, income, and occupation (Hall 1992; Hughes and Hertel 1990; Keith and Herring 1991; Neal and Wilson 1989; Russell, Wilson and Hall 1993). This undoubtedly plays a role in the views of Black women toward interracial dating since the discrimination based on skin color may be associated with the decision to date interracially as a privileging of lighter skin—the lightest skin of all, white women (Russell, Wilson, and Hall 1993).

Mass media culture also reproduces certain images of Black women, which often include being opposed to interracial relationships. In popular movies such as *The Brothers* (Gary Hardwick 2001), *Jungle Fever* (Spike Lee 1991), *Save the Last Dance* (Thomas Carter 2001), and *Waiting to Exhale* (Forrest Whitaker 1995), Black women's anger and opposition toward interracial relationships between Black men and white women are depicted. For example, much of Spike Lee's film *Jungle Fever* revolves around an interracial affair between a married Black man and his white secretary. Significant attention is paid to the responses of the Black women involved, particularly the impact of the interracial affair on his wife Drew. In one scene, Drew and her friends discuss the "low class white trash white women who throw themselves at African American men." The women conclude that "if it wasn't for the 29,000 white bitches . . . who give up the pussy and are stealing all the Black men," they would have men to date and marry.

Yet how do the voices of African American women compare to these popular images? In what follows, I explore the meanings attached to interracial unions among Black women, using critical analysis to understand the underlying meanings of the views of Black women on interracial dating and marriage. Although the women's narratives are not generalizable, there are common threads that run through the varied women's views and add to our understanding of the meanings of interracial relationships for Black women.

## METHOD

This study draws on two data sources: focus group interviews with selected Black student organizations on three college campuses and separate in-depth interviews with Black women married to white men. The interviews were conducted between 1999 and 2001 in the Northeast region of the country. The data were originally collected for a larger study of societal responses of white and Black families and communities to interracial couples (Chito Childs 2005). For this article, I am conducting a separate analysis of the Black women's responses. While the main focus is on the voices of the Black college women on Black-white relationships, the data from in-depth interviews with Black women who are involved interracially will also be used to illustrate the complexities of Black women's views and further our understanding of the college women's views.

The focus group interviews with Black college women are part of a larger group interview project wherein white and Black college student organizations were interviewed separately about their views on interracial dating. One of the reasons that colleges were chosen as community sites for the focus group research is that the college is often heralded as a place where racial barriers can be broken down and opportunities for interracial interaction and relationships are possible. I conducted the nonrandom focus groups with members of Black/African American student organizations at three universities in the Northeast region of the country. The three separate focus groups were conducted at weekly meetings of the

organizations with 10 women at an Ivy League university, 12 women at a private Jesuit university, and 7 women at a public state university. Each focus group followed a semistructured list of questions where the respondents were encouraged to discuss their views for as long as necessary. The college women ranged in age from 18 to 23 and were all full-time college students. Although some women described growing up in lower-income neighborhoods, the sample was overwhelmingly middle class. When discussing the data, I will not differentiate between the different colleges, since the students' responses were remarkably similar.

I also include data from separate in-depth interviews I conducted with four Black women who were married to white men. These interviews help to illustrate the multifaceted and complicated relationship that exists between Black women and the issue of interracial relationships. This nonrandom sample was identified through contacts, through referrals, and even by approaching the women in public. (I also interviewed nine Black men–white women couples, but since the focus here is on Black women, the results of those interviews will not be discussed.) The Black women I interviewed were aged 24, 32, 45, and 47. They were all college educated, with one woman having completed postdoctoral work. The interviews were semistructured and lasted between two and three hours. Since this was part of a larger project that looked at the experiences of Black-white couples, the white partners were present during the interviews, which may have influenced what the women said and how they characterized their views. Each interview was tape-recorded and transcribed, with relevant themes and issues identified in the narratives.

The interview structure was different for the Black women who were in an interracial relationship and the Black women in college communities, yet most of the issues that I addressed were the same. I asked all respondents to discuss their experiences with and views of Black-white relationships. Also, I encouraged them to discuss the views of Black women within their families and communities on interracial dating and marriage. In the focus group interviews, the college women's discussions and responses focused primarily on their views of Black men who date and marry interracially, not other Black women who are interracially involved. With the Black women who are intermarried, I also asked questions about their own experiences being involved interracially and how they negotiate their identities within their families and communities. I reviewed and analyzed the women's responses, looking for relevant data, logical relationships/contradictions, and emergent themes that will be discussed in the next section.

There are a number of limitations to this study. Since it is based on small, nonrandom samples, it is not generalizable, yet it does still allow us to explore important issues related to Black women and interracial relationships. In the focus group interviews, given the resistance to Black-white relationships, Black women who may have dated interracially or wanted to may have been hesitant to express this view in the group context. Also, in the interviews with the Black women who were interracially involved, the presence of their white partners may have caused them to leave out certain views or negative experiences that the white partners were

not aware of. My own racial/ethnic identity as a white Portuguese woman may also have limited or otherwise affected how the women responded. I addressed this with the women, who often initiated the conversation by asking me why and how I became interested in this topic. I answered by discussing how previous research on interracial relationships tended to focus on the couples, or the views of whites, virtually ignoring the views of African Americans. I also described my personal connection to the issue, in that my daughter and son are African American/Portuguese. While this could obviously influence what the women said, the women talked openly and at great length about their views. Many of the college women stated that they “enjoyed” the opportunity to “speak their minds” about interracial dating since it is something that they often discussed among each other.

### FINDINGS: COLLEGE WOMEN IN FOCUS GROUPS

Among the women in the college groups—none of whom acknowledged being involved interracially—there was a definitive consensus that interracial relationships were problematic. The following statements illustrate this opposition:

Blacks just like to see other Blacks, especially Black men who are successful, to stay Black, be with a Black woman. . . . It’s just about respecting and applauding those who don’t go interracial.

Definitely a problem in the Black community because it takes away from us, and we’re already struggling to succeed as a people.

Blacks have a problem with it. . . . [I] would be uncomfortable knowing someone who dated a white person because whites just don’t understand Blacks.

While the opposition was sometimes voiced in individual terms, much of the college women’s discussion revolved around the opposition of their families and communities. The following statements reflect the common responses given by the college women:

My family raised me to [be] very proud of who I am, a Black woman, and they instilled in me the belief that I would never want to be with anyone but a strong Black man.

My mom would have a problem with it; she just doesn’t trust white people.

These women stated that opposition to interracial relationships exists at least on some level in Black communities, and in their own families, which shaped their views.

Based on the narratives of the college women, white racism plays a central role in Black opposition to interracial relationships. The women discussed how racism and discrimination permeate all of society, which can make the idea of choosing to interact intimately with whites a problem. One college woman argued that “no



white person can understand; you just want to be with someone who knows what prejudice feels like without having to explain how it feels." Another woman asked, "If whites still think you are inferior, why would I or any Black person want to be with one?"

The college women challenged the motives of Black individuals who choose to date interracially. They maintained that interracial relationships are a sign that one is removed from African American communities. Blacks who intermarry are accused of having a negative self-image and perceiving whites as superior, which is understood as a self-internalization of white racism. The college women describe Blacks who are involved interracially as "less Black":

Blacks need to come together; those who do date interracially are traitors.

Black men who are with white women are usually also submerged in white culture and have white friends.

The perception of sellout for Blacks that date interracially comes from Black guys who act white do tend to date white girls.

The women equate being involved interracially with betraying one's family and community. Interracial marriage is described as an "escape into white society." The college women argued that only African Americans "who are removed from their race" or who are "weak" engage in interracial relationships. They gave examples of "sellouts," such as Black celebrities Bryant Gumbel (who left his Black wife for a white woman) and Wesley Snipes and Dennis Rodman (who have, according to these women, publicly stated they date only white women). As these comments illustrate, the college women's discussions focused almost exclusively on Black men who engage in interracial relationships. For single young women, a Black man's choice to be with a white woman is seen as a specific betrayal of Black women because the decision to date interracially does not mean just choosing white women but also rejecting Black women.

While the Black college women's discussions of the issue of interracial relationships focused mostly on Black men with white women, they also all stated that it was unlikely that they would ever date interracially, as represented in the following comments.

I just couldn't see a white person as part of my life, like that, my family.

I don't know how or why someone could ever get over the racism of whites to date a white person.

Still, these college women expressed more accepting views of other Black women's dating white men. The following statements illustrate this:

A Black woman with a white man can go further, and there's not the same idea that she's going to desert the African American community.

You see so many Black guys running around with white girls that it's almost like, See, this is what you get.

When I see a Black girl with a white guy, I think it must be love; he must be doing something right for her to cross over like that, or maybe he has money.

The college women described how Black women with white men is justifiable given the number of Black men who date interracially and also because it is assumed that the Black woman will stay committed and involved in Black communities unlike the Black man, who is viewed as wasting his success on this white woman and in white communities. This issue of commitment is important, for it seems that interracial couples who maintain an interest in and commitment to African American culture may be viewed more positively, whether it is a Black man or a Black woman. For example, one young woman discussed "this street where there were lots of interracial families, and they all did this weekly African dancing." She described the white partners as "more Africanized than a lot of Black people I know and I did think that was kind of cool."

Despite acknowledging acceptance of particular interracial relationships, all three groups of college women expressed concern with the "phenomenon" of Black men–white women couples and the racialized and gendered motives and stereotypes that existed:

It's just sex, it's curiosity or just experimenting, or it's for what you can get, like Black guys want her to do this and that and she does, or it's about money; it's usually something.

It's even worse than not being genuine; it's dating outside your race for a purpose. . . . Black guys want their laundry done, homework done, food cooked, guys tell Black girls off because they won't do their shit.

It's so bad that I've heard seniors tell freshmen when they say they can't do their homework, "Haven't you found yourself a white girl yet?"

Relationships between Black men and white women are perceived to be based on what the other can get from the relationship, whether it is sex, status, money, or services such as laundry and homework. Black men were described as choosing white women over Black women because white women are willing to cater to them, while Black women are not.

The Black college women further discussed the divergent images of "easy" white women and "difficult" Black women that existed among Black men. One woman described how "there's this perception of Black women as more confrontational, too much trouble, which is coupled with the idea that white girls are easy, easy to control; that's the dynamic you have operating there." Another woman added that the Black guys she knows say they are "just sleeping with the white girl, and prefer white women because they are more subservient, don't ask where are you going or what are you doing; you don't have to call them your girlfriend; white girls are just easier to have sex with." Other women described how "Black guys feel

that white girls are easier, sexually loose, and on the flip side that Black women are too aggressive, too controlling, have an attitude, not confident, but nasty, gold digger." This imagery is much different from the historical construction of the white woman as the virgin and the Black woman as the whore, yet the same purpose is served. Within the women's discussions, the white women are perceived as sexually loose and easy, yet this only enhances their desirability. The idea of racial difference remains with white women's and Black women's being characterized in complete opposition to one another—white women are viewed as the standard of femininity in terms of physical appearance but also personal characteristics such as submissiveness.

The college women also described the phenomenon of white women who pursue Black men:

White women just have this idea of it's so great to be with a Black guy because he's a big Black stud. . . . You can tell the white girl that he's a dog and she still wants him probably even more.

Black men are in fashion; call it the resurgence of the Black male. It's like interracial dating is a fashion statement, a token especially when it is an African American athlete.

In this discussion, the college women described how "Black men can be dark skinned and they are still valued" yet "light skin for women is valued, which makes Black women devalued." This reflects the gender differences in standards of beauty where the essence of what it means to be feminine is equated with white: "Under these feminine norms African American women can never be as beautiful as white women because they never become white" (Collins 2004, 194). While very few of the Black college women acknowledged that they would date a white man, they discussed how the majority of white men do not find Black women attractive or acceptable as mates. The college women did maintain that "Black women are just more attracted to Black men," but they also stated that Black women do not date interracially because "white guys are hesitant to approach them" or "white guys just aren't as aggressive as white women, that's why they don't get to know Black women, but you have white women falling all over Black guys." The college women argued that they did not think most white men found African American women attractive because of their body types, offering explanations such as "white guys are used to white girls who don't have a butt."

These images of interracial unions, which were discussed among the college women, are inextricably tied to the intersections of race and gender as well as the literature discussed on Black women, attractiveness, and the marriage market. A woman's perceived attractiveness is central to being chosen in the marriage market, and Black women start with a deficit because attractiveness is based on white European standards of beauty. "The broader structural factors effecting African American women have created a context in which interpersonal interactions are shaped by competition . . . not unlike others who fight over limited resources" (Rockquemore

2002, 493). Faced with realistic concerns about finding a partner, Black women are threatened by the perceived trend of white women who pursue Black men and the Black men who choose white women.

According to the college women, Black men's choices to date interracially are devastating to them personally as women looking for a partner but also to Black women collectively as a group. Consider the following quotes:

As a Black woman, it is difficult enough to have to deal with whites who [act] as if [Black] is inferior, but it is even harder to have your own men act like white is better and systematically choose white women over you; it is hard not to get angry because it feels as if no one values your worth as a woman.

You grow up with these men all your life, but then you're not good enough to be a wife. . . . It's disrespectful and degrading.

One woman offered advice to the other women and described in detail how she deals with these issues. She stated that she used "to let it hurt her" but now she advocates that Black women should "turn that anger on themselves, and think that guy is missing out on me." She continued, "Don't show you are mad, don't settle for someone who doesn't treat you like white girls are treated; find a man, stop hating, and find a man who treats you well," adding that "when a white girl says, 'I got me a Black man,' you can say, 'Good' because you got you the same."

These emotional statements of the college women in the focus groups paint a picture of white women who are submissive and do anything and everything for Black men, yet Black men are also viewed as treating white women better. The college women's opposition is largely based on the loss of potential partners and the perceived reasons that Black men choose to date interracially. When Black men choose white women, it is understood as valuing white women and therefore treating them better. At the same time, the college women see these choices to date white women as based on the different images of white women as more feminine—submissive and catering to a man's every whim—and Black women as further from the ideal (read white) because they are more outspoken and less submissive. Bebe Moore Campbell expressed the sentiments on how she and some friends felt when they saw a prominent Black actor come into a restaurant with a white woman as a date: "For many African-American women, the thought of African American men, particularly those who are successful, dating or marrying white women is like being passed over at the prom by the boy we consider our steady date, causing us pain, rage and an overwhelming sense of betrayal and personal rejection. . . . For sisters, the message that we don't measure up is the nightmare side of integration" (Russell and Wilson 1996). Interracial relationships, especially those between Black men and white women, can still have deleterious effects on Black women. The college women raised legitimate concerns about their future and questioned whether there will be a Black man to raise a family with because of the shortage of Black men, which is attributed, at least partly, to large numbers of Black men's choosing white women. Furthermore, the women reference the unlikelihood of

white men as partners based on white racism, Eurocentric standards of beauty, and lack of opportunity or desire to interact.

### FINDINGS: INTERVIEWS WITH WOMEN IN INTERRACIAL MARRIAGES

Given that none of the college women acknowledged dating interracially, it is also important to consider the voices of Black women who are interracially involved. The four Black women interviewed who were married to white men—Aisha, Sharon, Nancy, and Gwen—acknowledged and discussed the existence of a collective opposition toward interracial relationships among Blacks, similar to the perceptions of the college women. These interracially married women cited white racism, concerns about the motives of the white partner, and the depth of the relationships as reasons why their families, friends, and others had concerns about their relationships. For example, Sharon, a 47-year-old managerial professional discussed how her brother and sisters would never be involved interracially and had mixed feelings about her marrying Kevin, a white man. “My younger sister accepts the relationship but not interracial in general. . . . She just doesn’t think white and Black should be together; she always says, ‘It is hard for me to relate to someone of a race that has killed, belittled, and continues to come into the Black community to break it up, I couldn’t do it.’ ”

Aisha, a 24-year-old sales associate, is married to Michael, whom she met while working with him at a retail store. She described how she was “really conscious of having a relationship with a white guy,” citing that she was “afraid” of what people would say, particularly her family and friends. Aisha described her own hesitation around Michael’s motives when they first started dating, asking him “why” he wanted to be with a Black woman before she “let him into her world.” She recounted the opposition she still deals with from within her community: “Being married to a Black man would be easier. . . . I go to dance clubs [predominantly Black] without him because it would be uncomfortable. . . . Or when he came to the West Indian Day Parade, it was a problem; everyone was like, ‘Who’s this; how dare you bring a white guy to this?’ ”

Gwen, a university professor in her early forties, recalled how the opposition she encountered affected a previous relationship with a fellow white student she dated during college.

I had dated a white guy when I was in graduate school for about three or four years . . . but in that relationship had difficulty. I don’t even think I ever admitted to anyone that we were actually dating. . . . I had always said I would never date someone who’s white. Never, ever, and I thought that to do that, it was betraying your race . . . that I could never love someone who was from a different racial background because they wouldn’t understand me, my culture. . . . I was always self-conscious about doing things with him, and I think it was because I hadn’t come to terms with our relationship, but I wasn’t so sure he didn’t see me as a novelty. He had never dated anyone

African American, and I had never dated anyone white. We were both coming to this as naive people.

Yet now, Gwen is married to a white man, Bill, whom she met while doing research for a postdoctoral fellowship at a high school where he was teaching. When I asked her what changed her mind, she said it was a number of factors. "I did remember that [in this first relationship] being in the mall, places like that, with him and going up the escalator one day, and there were these Black girls behind us, and they were insulting to me, and I got angry. I think what they also did was toughen me up a little bit and decide that I could do what I wanted to do and didn't feel that I had to conform to anyone." Gwen's narrative reveals how initially her knowledge of African American opposition (and her own distrust of whites) influenced her views, but with Bill, she had grown stronger from the way she had been treated previously and felt more comfortable being in an interracial relationship.

While both the interracially involved women and the college women discuss the opposition of others, the difference in age between the two groups may affect their views and choices regarding interracial relationships. For example, Gwen discussed the way her views on interracial dating changed from when she was a graduate student who secretly dated a white man and viewed all interracial relationships as a betrayal of the Black community to her decision as a postdoctoral student to get involved with Bill, who became her husband. Gwen stated that as she got older, she did not let others' views affect her and her decision about whom to date. While she no longer views all interracial relationships as a betrayal, she does voice the same views as the college women when addressing her own struggle with feeling like a "sellout" and her belief that some interracial relationships justly fit the term, especially those involving Black men who only date white women.

I thought for a long time that I was selling out. It was also that you didn't see people of your own race as being attractive and desirable and worth being involved with. I don't think that anymore. I don't think all of us sell out; I think that those of us who are married to whites who are actively involved in the African American community feel we must do it and more likely throw ourselves into it. We might be trying to prove ourselves a bit too much, but there are Black males who fit the stereotype that will never date a Black woman. I think they are insecure and do anything they can to distance themselves from Black, does whatever he can to lighten up his gene pool.

Gwen reaffirmed her own racial identity in terms of her commitment to racial solidarity and mentioned activities and organizations she is involved in to counter the sellout image. "If people have questioned my credibility, they've questioned it behind my back. I don't think people would dare question it to my face. The stuff that I have done [both her academic credentials as professor on race and her community work for racial justice], I mean it's such a dumb question on credibility. . . . I know I'm more likely to step up to the plate than a lot of them are." Gwen draws on her participation in and commitment to the Black communities she lives in and works in to contradict this image of a sellout, not unlike the college women who

described Black women in interracial relationships as more acceptable because the women were likely to stay committed to their community.

The other interracially married women I interviewed (Aisha and Sharon) never acknowledged viewing interracial relationships as selling out, emphasizing how limiting and ignorant they thought that belief is:

I've been called a sellout by Black men, but . . . it doesn't make me feel bad because whites don't owe me anything, so I can't imagine what I'm selling out to. (Aisha)

I am a strong Black woman on my own; it's about the man, not the color. (Sharon)

While Gwen acknowledged that she may work harder in Black communities because of not wanting to be discredited among Blacks, Aisha and Sharon do not feel their relationships or actions can be used as indicators of how Black they are.

While the Black women I interviewed may struggle with familial and community opposition, none believed that they had internalized white racism or were rejecting Black men or a Black identity. These interracially involved women had less to say about interracial relationships between Black men and white women, quite possibly because they had a partner or even because their white partner was present. Only Gwen discussed the issue in depth, offering a similar perspective to that of the college women interviewed:

I would think not all Black women have opposition to it, but there are some Black women who do, and that's because the number of available Black males is very small. Available Black males who are employed and not in prison is very small . . . so Black males who go to predominantly white colleges and marry white women, you have a lot of educated Black males being taken completely out of the pool and you have these [Black] women who . . . and white men weren't dating the Black women . . . so they had little chance for relationships, so there was some resentment toward white women because of that; there is some wondering why, that when a Black man makes it, that he all of a sudden thinks that white women are more desirable.

Even though she is interracially married, Gwen understands and may even agree with the collective opposition among Black women toward Black-white relationships involving a Black man and white woman.

## DISCUSSION

Significant attention has been paid to interracial dating and marriage within social scientific research, the media, and to a lesser extent, popular culture. Yet Black women's experiences and views have been largely neglected, or if addressed, Black women have been depicted as angry and oppositional to interracial relationships with little attention paid to the basis of this anger and opposition. I have addressed this void by shifting the focus away from interracial couples and instead listening to the voices of Black women about their views on interracial relation-

ships. The data presented suggest that Black women's opposition to interracial dating is not rooted simply in jealousy and anger toward white women as is often portrayed but is based on what interracial relationships represent to Black women and signify about Black women's worth. The collective opposition to interracial relationships is not based in the belief that whites are inferior or undesirable, but rather it is based on white racism, Black internalization of racism, and ulterior motives. These data show how interracial relationships affect people differently based on race and gender, with Black women's having a reduced number of available Black male partners due to their higher rates of interracial dating as well as fewer opportunities to date interracially. The women expressed their frustration and anger not with individual couples but with a society that devalued their worth as women and how men from their own racial communities seem to have bought into these negative images. Black men dating interracially are seen as a rejection of Black womanhood and an embracement of white womanhood. These findings suggest that interracial couples are not viewed as individual relationships but rather are seen as representative of a lack of economic and cultural commitment to African American communities.

The Black women's responses show that their opposition is based on how these relationships affect them, yet their responses also suggest that individual interracial relationships were accepted, which was further highlighted in the interviews with the interracially married Black women. The interracially married Black women acknowledged and discussed the opposition that exists focusing on their own experiences, yet they still made the decision to marry white men. The Black college women's discussion differed from the interracially married women's, with their focus on Black men dating white women, which may be attributed to the college women's younger age and the fact that they were looking for partners. Still, most of these women knew and expressed conditional acceptance for interracial couples that did not fit the negative images that they discussed and under certain circumstances, such as the "African-dancing interracial couple" mentioned by one college woman. The opposition to the relationships diminished, or at least lessened, when the white partners did not fit the model of white racism that was expected or the Black partner maintained a commitment to the Black communities, particularly Black women with white men who remained grounded in Black communities.

Relationships between Black men and white women, even if based on love, respect, and commitment, are viewed as detrimental to Black women, the Black family structure, and the survival of Black communities. The underlying reality that the Black college women described is a shortage of available Black men and a lack of "substantive opportunities" to date interracially because of the white standards of beauty that deem them unsuitable mates to white men (Collins 2004).

Listening to the responses of these women has added a different perspective to the research on interracial relationships by taking into account how these relationships affect Black women. Yet now, what can be done? Some, such as Kennedy (2003), argue, "We all embrace . . . a cosmopolitan ethos that welcomes the prospect of genuine, loving interracial intimacy." But the solution is not so simple as to



encourage Black women to embrace interracial dating, as this view ignores the realities underlying their opposition. Yet there are no new simple answers. Collins suggested, "Moving through this pain requires more than blaming White women for allegedly taking Black men, or Black men for rejecting us. It demands changing the 'circumstances that create the pain'" (2000, 166). While the focus of this work has been on Black women's views on interracial relationships, the "problem" is certainly not a problem of Black women, as Black women alone do not have the power to change the current situation. Yet it is not even a problem of interracial couples, as interracial couples did not create the current structure even though they are symbolic of the problem to Black women. Rather, it is a problem of racism and sexism, where Black women are devalued based on their race and gender. For change to occur, whites and Blacks, men and women, need to begin by addressing these racial and gender inequalities.

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