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Color, Culture, or Cousin? Multiracial Americans and Framing Boundaries in Interracial Relationships

Objective:This article analyzes how some multiracial people—the "products" of interracial relationships—conceptualize what counts as an interracial relationship and how they discuss the circumstances that influence these definitions.

Background: Scholars have argued that the added complexity expanding multiracial populations contribute to dating and marriage-market conditions requires additional study; this article expands on the limited research regarding how multiracial people perceive interraciality.

Method: *The article uses in-depth interviews with self-identified multiracial women (*N = *30) who used online dating platforms to facilitate their dating lives in the following three cities in Texas: Austin, Houston, and San Antonio.*

Results: *In framing their relationships through lenses centered around skin color, cultural difference, and "familiarity" in terms of seeing potential partners as similar to non-White male family members, multiracial women illustrate varied and overlapping means of describing their intimate relationships, providing additional nuance to sociological understandings of shifts in preferences and norms around partner choice across racial/ethnic lines and opening up opportunities to continue the exploration of the impact of racial inequality on partner choice.*

Conclusion: *Multiracial people internalize racial, gendered, and fetishistic framings about potential partners similarly to monoracial people, demonstrating how racial boundaries and degrees of intimacy are (re)constructed for this growing demographic in the United States.*

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The percentages of interracial and interethnic couplings have increased in the United States, with 10% of opposite-gender married couples having partners of what the Census terms "different race or Hispanic origin" in 2010, compared with 18% of opposite-gender unmarried partners and 21% of same-gender unmarried partners (Lofquist, Lugaila, O'Connell, & Feliz, 2012). Historically, there has been little occasion to question what "counts" as an interracial relationship, as the logic that people in the United States employ stems from legal definitions, primarily related to chattel slavery, the Reconstruction era, and the subsequent antimiscegenation laws that characterized Jim Crow policy. Americans tout the 1967 *Loving v. Virginia* Supreme Court decision as the penultimate triumph over the discrimination faced by interracial couples.

Although social scientists continue to explore the struggles that interracial couples and families face—from experiencing racism (Nemoto, 2009; Steinbugler, 2012) to coping with and navigating neighborhood segregation (DaCosta, 2007; Hou, Wu, Schimmele, & Myles, 2015) to intrafamilial dynamics around race, gender, and

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power (Bratter & King, 2008)—there remains limited research as to why certain relationships count as interracial and what implications these definitions may have for understandings of racial identity and racial boundary-making. Furthermore, there are few studies that explore this question for multiracial people, particularly with a focus on gender given that women are more likely to identify as multiracial in the United States (Davenport, 2016). As Bonam and Shih (2009) argue, multiracial individuals can have different race-related experiences compared to monoracial individuals, influencing their comfort with interracial relationships. Although they asked participants about forming a relationship with "someone of a different race," Bonam and Shih (2009, p. 98) note that they have no information about how different race is being defined nor do they know if the definitions of different race that these participants may have line up with societal demarcations of different race. Recent research suggests that multiracial people are not more likely to challenge racial boundaries via partner choice (Littlejohn, 2019), and several scholars argue that multiracial people experience greater success across racial lines in dating, particularly within online spaces (Curington, Lin, & Lundquist, 2015; Feliciano, 2016; McGrath, Tsunokai, Schultz, Kavanaugh, & Tarrence, 2016). Yet, these studies are limited in their ability to illuminate how multiracial people perceive their potential partners or how these partners perceive them, and few studies have the data to assess how mainstream discourse and logic around racism, sexism, or xenophobia may influence partner choice for multiracials (see Buggs, 2017). As Song (2016) argues, studying multiracial people's partnering patterns provides a means of exploring the link between intermarriage and integration, particularly the assumption of "genuine social acceptance" of racialized minorities and what it means to "share" racial or ethnic background with a partner.

It is with these concerns in mind that this article focuses on the following two questions: How are multiracial women in the Southwestern United States defining what counts as an interracial relationship? How do they come to their definitions? I find that multiracial women use the following three ideological frames to distinguish what is and what is not an interracial relationship: first, that skin "color" matters in the sense that partners in a given romantic relationship have different appearances; second, that "culture" matters, particularly for those who may be perceived as White and who want to make distinctions between themselves and the White people they may date; and last, familiarity, most often invoked as "he reminded me too much of my cousin" or some other male family member. For this last frame, women use notions of familial closeness as a means of determining whom they will not date as that familiarity is undesirable.

Interracial Relationships and Studying Racial Boundaries

Research focused on ever-shifting dating/marriage market conditions evaluates the potential partners available for dating, cohabitation, or marriage as well as variation in access to, and maintaining, partnerships. It is well established that the racial boundaries of the market are shaped by structural conditions such as racist attitudes and racial/ethnic segregation (Blau, Beeker, & Fitzpatrick, 1984; Qian & Lichter, 2007); social scientists have spent the past several decades debating how much "crossing the color line" may signal social progress (Batson, Qian, & Lichter, 2006; Qian & Lichter, 2007, 2011; Telles & Sue, 2009; Yancey, 2002). Some scholars suggest that multiracial populations in the United States introduce new dynamics to these markets, with some mixed-White multiracial people having a greater ability to classify themselves as White and thus blurring boundaries or inflating levels of interracial marriage with Whites (Qian & Lichter, 2011). Aside from illuminating details about shifts in partner selection norms, data on multiracials provide nuance for assessing racial stratification boundaries (Bratter, 2018).

Still other research finds that part-White multiracials have a greater likelihood of marrying White partners (Littlejohn, 2019; Miyawaki, 2015) and question if this indicates cultural group "dilution" for future generations (Song & Gutierrez, 2015). Yet, debates of the merits and drawbacks of interraciality foreground the mainstream U.S. notion that increased intimacy between people of different races will reduce social inequality despite the fact that scholars have illustrated how interracial relationships in and of themselves are not inherently progressive (Nemoto, 2009; Steinbugler, 2012; Twine, 2011) or that interracial and interethnic couplings may be at greater risk for divorce (Bratter & King,

2008; Zhang & Van Hook, 2009), likely tied to the pressures of social inequality. Several race scholars (DaCosta, 2007; Sexton, 2008) argue that the valorizing of interracial relationships and multiracial people (the "postracial" society and "Obama phenomenon" discourses) inhibits social progress due to upholding the logic of colorblindness, the ideology that relies on the notion that race no longer matters for people's opportunities (Bonilla-Silva, 2013).

Discursive/Ideological Frames, Skin Color, and Perceptions of Race

Framing is central to how we understand our social world—the White racial frame allows White Americans (and non-White people who have been socialized in the United States) to interpret and defend White privileges and "advantaged conditions" as merited and earned over inferiors rather than as a result of systemic oppression (Feagin, 2013). This framing relies on stereotypes, narratives, images and language, racialized emotions, and an inclination toward discriminatory action, influencing what people know, understand, see, hear, feel, and do. How multiracial people understand what is and is not an interracial relationship in a U.S. context utilizes aspects of existing racial ideology and social frames. As others have found, multiracials use language to describe themselves, their interests, and their relationships rooted in dominant cultural logics (Buggs, 2017; Song, 2015) and the communities they know via class and neighborhood segregation (Davenport, 2016; Song, 2016).

The framing of certain racial narratives is apparent in studies of skin color and perceptions of racial discrimination; scholars have found that darker-skinned Latinx people perceive more discrimination than light-skinned Latinx people (Araujo-Dawson, 2015; Ortiz & Telles, 2012) and that lighter skin conveys social and economic advantages to non-White people as a result of not being negatively perceived (by Whites and other non-Whites; Hunter, 2007). "Observed race"—how people are classified by others—is increasingly more at odds with how people conceptualize their own racial identities (Roth, 2018, p. 1094), and some scholars argue that the rigidity of race in the United States is undermined by racialized statuses or experiences such as going to prison or living in poverty (Saperstein & Penner, 2012). Critiques of such perspectives question what ubiquitous racial fluidity means for the durability of White privilege given that observers internalize powerful stereotypes (part of the White racial frame) that decrease the likelihood of certain people moving between racial groups over time (Alba, Isolera, & Lindeman, 2016; Kramer, DeFina, & Hannon, 2016). Regardless, racial ambiguity among multiracials (Kao & Doyle, 2007; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2008) remains central to the above debates and as such is pertinent to how the women in this study identify themselves, perceive others, believe they are perceived, and ultimately how they define interracial relationships.

Race/Ethnicity, Desirability, and Partner Selection in the Age of Online Dating

Rosenfeld (2007) argues that the investigation of so-called nontraditional unions provides insight into changes in family structure, marriage patterns and practices, and even the socialization of children. It is for these broader reasons that research into online dating has continued to draw interest, as technology plays a significant role in how new relationships are formed and how boundary crossing occurs (Lewis, 2013; Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). Although there is a wealth of research on interracial couplings inclusive of online dating phenomena, the inclusion of multiracial people in contemporary dating analyses is much more limited (Bonam & Shih, 2009; Curington et al., 2015; Littlejohn, 2019; McGrath et al., 2016; Miyawaki, 2015; Qian & Lichter, 2011) and the qualitative assessments of these dynamics even more so (Buggs, 2017; Song, 2015, 2016). These studies come to some similar conclusions regarding the desirability of some multiracial people: Being mixed with White has been found to increase the likelihood of response online (Curington et al., 2015), and being a non-Black biracial dater has been found to be consistent with a preference for White partners (Littlejohn, 2019; McGrath et al., 2016). Specifically, some self-identified multiracial groups (Black/Whites, American Indian/Whites, and Asian/Whites) have a greater likelihood of being married to Whites, perhaps signifying that mixed-White multiracials may be in the process of assimilating into whiteness (Miyawaki, 2015). Because dating and marriage markets operate under the constraints of a racial hierarchy that privileges whiteness, multiracial

individuals are likely to be expected to uphold White heteropatriarchal norms and politics to maintain a position of "honorary whiteness" (Bonilla-Silva, 2013, p. 227), an intermediate group in the racial hierarchy theorized to include light-skinned Asians, Latinx people, and most multiracials. The trend toward achieving honorary whiteness (or desiring it in partners) seems evident in the ways that multiracial daters have been found to be less inclined to seek partners who are non-White to the detriment of Asian, Hispanic, and Black daters (Buggs, 2017; McGrath et al., 2016).

Given the quantitative focus of much of the aforementioned research, the interview-based evaluation by Yodanis, Lauer, and Ota (2012) of mate selection based on affiliative ethnic identities provides the needed contextualization of how people select romantic partners across racial and ethnic lines. The concept of affiliative ethnic identity emphasizes the ways that multiculturalism has facilitated a more widespread appreciation for building knowledge of, and subsequently consuming and deploying, culture(s) that one may or may not have ancestral ties to (Jiménez, 2010). The extension of this concept to romantic relationships suggests that people engage in interracial relationships not because difference has become less important but, rather, specifically because of their attraction to difference. Romantic relationships provide an avenue for this type of pursuit, serving to legitimize the acquisition of new cultural knowledge and practices. Examining relationship formation from individual perspectives is evident in other studies, including the behaviors people engage in during the early stages of dating (O'Sullivan, Cheng, Harris, & Brooks-Gunn, 2007) or the ways in which people make decisions about entering into new relationships stages, such as having sex for the first time, cohabitating, or getting married (Farber & Miller-Cribbs, 2014; Lichter, Graefe, & Brown, 2003; Manning & Smock, 2005; Sassler, 2010). By centering multiracial women's perspectives on their romantic relationships, this article picks up on the call(s) for scholars to engage in more research on variation in partnering behavior by race and ethnicity (Sassler, 2010) and to renew the focus on the qualitative assessments of couples in interracial relationships (Telles & Sue, 2009; Yodanis et al., 2012).

Method

My data derive from in-depth interviews with 30 women residing in three cities in Texas—Austin, Houston, and San Antonio—who used the website OkCupid for online dating between 2015 and 2016. Most U.S. regionally specific research focusing on multiracials is situated in areas noted for their large multiracial populations, such as the states of California, Hawaii, or Washington. Locating this project in the Southwest provides a different context in which to analyze how multiraciality is constructed and understood. For instance, Texas became one of five "majority-minority" states in 2012, a designation that scholars have noted affects racial attitudes and political outcomes such as ideology and policy (Craig, Rucker, & Richeson, 2018). The cultural connections to *mestizaje* (an ideology of racial/cultural mixture) and *la frontera*—the "borderlands" region of Texas in the Rio Grande Valley (see Anzaldúa, 2012)—coupled with the fact that these three cities are among the fastest growing both in the state of Texas and the United States makes for a unique confluence of factors shaping racial identity and the dating and marriage markets.

I contacted women who self-identified as multiracial in their dating profiles according to the following racial and ethnic options provided by OkCupid: Asian, Black, Hispanic/Latin, Indian, Middle Eastern, Native American, Pacific Islander, White, and other. In total, I messaged 417 women across all three cities who had identified themselves with at least two of the available categories, including those who identified as only "other." In the initial messages I identified myself as a researcher, noting that I was interested in the "dating experiences of multiracial/multiethnic women who use OkCupid, particularly how racial identity and family expectations impact their dating lives." My inclusion of women who self-selected more than one racial or ethnic category for their dating profiles is consistent with other research exploring online dating (see Curington et al., 2015; McGrath et al., 2016). Women who participated identified themselves with two or more of these available options online; in person, they often identified differently and shared additional details about their racial, ethnic, and national identities (see Table 1). Because the respondents used identifiers that did not fit within the mechanisms that OkCupid offers, throughout this text I instead use interview

Table 1. *Descriptive Characteristics of Respondents*

Pseudonym	Age	Reported racial/ethnic identity	Educational attainment
Aidah	27	Bangladeshi (Pakistani and Iranian)	Bachelor's degree
Allyson	27	Hapa/White and Filipino	Master's degree
Anita	30	Black and Afro-Latina (Mexican, Tejano)	Bachelor's degree
Audre	23	Black (Nigerian) and Creole/White	High school
Autumn	21	Black and White	Bachelor's degree
Blair	27	Hispanic and White	Bachelor's degree
Calla	36	Blaxican/Mexican and Black	Associate's degree
Corinne	31	Korean and White	Bachelor's degree
Desi	24	Spanish, Irish, and Native American	High school
Dominique	35	Other/Black and White	Bachelor's degree
Gia	22	Hispanic/Mexican and Lebanese	Bachelor's degree
India	24	Black and Asian (Filipino and Chinese)	Bachelor's degree
Jacinta	24	Black and White	Bachelor's degree
Jada	22	Black and Native American (Cherokee)	Associate's degree
Janet	23	Black and European (Italian)	Bachelor's degree
Kai	22	Black (Jamaican) and Asian (Vietnamese, Chinese)	Bachelor's degree
Kaitlyn	28	White and Mexican	Master's degree
Lark	24	Jewish and Native American	Master's degree
Leilani	28	Black and Korean	Bachelor's degree
Lorena	31	Chicana/White and Hispanic	Master's degree
Makaela	35	Biracial/Black and White	Bachelor's degree
Marie	26	Arab and White	Bachelor's degree
Monique	18	U.S. Black, White, Native American (Cherokee, Yemasee)	High school
Nicole	28	Native American (Cherokee) and White	Master's degree
Nina	39	Latina/Black, Indigenous, White (European)	High school
Rahel	28	Other/Mexican and Persian	Bachelor's degree
Samantha	26	Hispanic/Mexican, Native American, Pacific Islander	Associate's degree
Shelby	25	White and Indian	Bachelor's degree
Tiffany	22	Black and Chamorro	High school
Valerie	22	American Black, Trinidadian	Bachelor's degree

identities rather than online categories. When not using indicated descriptors (Table 1), I use the term *multiracial* to indicate belonging to more than one racial/ethnic group and situate women into groups: White-appearing (rather than the intention-based "White-passing") or non-White-appearing (either light, medium, or dark skinned). (*White-appearing* refers to women who describe appearing White to others or being mistaken for "just" White rather than my own determination of their appearance. Non-White-appearing women experience racialization as non-White.) I also use pseudonyms for my participants who were either selected by the women themselves or by me from popular baby name lists.

My participants ranged in age from 18 to 40 years, with educational backgrounds including high school, associate's, bachelor's, or master's diplomas. The sample is highly educated, likely a result of these women being active users of OkCupid, a platform that has in the past touted having the "most educated users" in online dating. All participants described experiences with dating men (although not exclusively), identifying themselves as bisexual/pansexual (n = 11) or straight (n = 19) as well as polyamorous (n = 4). Although all participants had active OkCupid accounts, a few were in some form of a committed relationship at the time of the interview and thus did not identify as single. Women did not need to be single or in a relationship at the time of the interview to participate, only to have an active account at the time of recruitment.

I personally conducted all interviews in person between June 2015 and May 2016, traveling to meet respondents in Houston and San Antonio

from Austin, where I resided. Potential participants rejected participation by "not really" identifying as multiracial or simply ignoring my initial online message; the concern about "not really" being multiracial happened in several cases despite women selecting multiple racial/ethnic options for their OkCupid profile. I inquired about why these identity selections were made; for those who responded, they mentioned being "White girls" who had recently learned of Native American ancestry.

For those who agreed to meet for an interview, I encouraged respondents to select a meeting place that felt comfortable and convenient; overwhelmingly, these locations were coffee shops. Participants were not compensated for their participation, although I would often offer to purchase them coffee or tea. Interviews were audio-recorded and lasted between 2 and 4.5 hours, averaging 2 hours and 45 minutes. The interviews were coded for themes with ATLAS.ti qualitative analysis software using an inductive method based on themes I began to identify while conducting the interviews, writing up postinterview memos, and transcribing the audio-recordings. In particular, the data for this article stem from questions I asked about the most recent dating experiences, past relationships, and family expectations and whether the women had ever dated someone of another race or ethnicity. I waited until they had indicated whether they had dated someone they perceived to be of a different race before explicitly asking if they perceived that relationship as "interracial." I encouraged my respondents to tell me what they felt that term referred to. Although I have insights from many hours of interview material and hundreds of pieces of data, these questions produced most of the data explored in this article.

Impact of Researcher Positionality

As a bisexual multiracial woman myself, in a similar age group and education level with most of the respondents, my positionality certainly impacted my participants' willingness to discuss the topics of race and intimacy. I had to navigate women initially fearing that I was messaging them romantically on OkCupid (I spent part of the data collection period with a profile that listed my orientation as "straight" and part of the time as "bisexual," which may have impacted the rates of responsiveness) and other queer women making advances or asking personal questions during the interviews. In addition, I asked questions about the development of multiracial identity and how these women felt they were reflected in popular culture. The participants also asked me about my own dating experiences and commented on my appearance. In most interviews, my curly hair and tan skin were noted, with some women stating that they were jealous of my skin tone or hair texture. My specific embodiment was used as a metric for women with which to compare their own appearances. These nuances around a fetishized, ideal multiracial appearance that many women found oppressive would likely have never manifested or manifested very differently had I been just White or had features that were less "exoticized." I believe that because of the shared multiracial status, my respondents felt comfortable speaking to me about these issues.

Defining Interracial Relationships Through Ideological Frames

In this section, I provide evidence for the three ideological frames that multiracial women use to explain their understandings of racial boundaries in relationships, providing insight into who makes an acceptable partner and who does not. The three frames in this section also form the title of this article: "color," referring to partners in a relationship having different physical appearances; "culture," referring to ways to make distinctions between oneself and the White people one may date; and last, "cousin," or what I refer to as undesirable familiarity, referring to the unattractiveness of potential partners that may remind a woman of some male family member.

Color: Drawing Skin-Tone Distinctions

For all of the women I interviewed, "we're different races" or "we look different" were the core reasons why committed romantic relationships were considered *interracial*, a term I use to refer to relationships between people who either are perceived by others or are perceived by the people involved as belonging to different racial or ethnic backgrounds. The distinction is important in a U.S. context, where groups such as Hispanic/Latinx people and Muslims are racialized. Although some women discussed not "seeing" color in the context of their romantic

relationship, they would admit that other people have ideas about what it means for two people who have different appearances to be together. Those who mentioned being mistaken for White described dealing with stares from other people when they were out with a darker skinned man, yet not raising any eyebrows when out with a White man or a man who looked racially similar. When race is made visible, particularly being "of color" in opposition to whiteness, multiracials contend with how they perceive their partners and how others perceive the couple (Song, 2015) As some noted, their racial appearance shifts depending on whom they are with, whether they have a tan, or as their hairstyling practices change. Sims (2016, pp. 578–580) calls this "consistent inconsistent racial perception," noting that the internalization of a racial identity based on external perception assumes that people are consistently perceived in the same way. Being inconsistently categorized by others consistently over time aids in development of multiracial people's identities, especially identities that are not rooted in single race categories (Sims, 2016). In addition, identity inconsistency can lead to benefits for multiracial people, especially if they gain access to White privilege (Kramer, Burke, & Charles, 2015). Variability in experiences and perception is important to note when discussing how women viewed themselves within relationships.

> Well…it also sort of depends on your definition of racial, because sometimes, some people kind of interchange that with cultural and there is a very different culture to that, too. There's a different way that he grew up and different traditions that he has that I don't know about but I saw it as an interracial couple because of skin tone. For example, the guy I just got out of the serious relationship with, he's Romanian. Born in Romania, and I never considered us to be a multi – like an interracial couple. I guess because I consider his race to be White but his culture was different than mine.
> (Nicole, 28, Native American and White)

Nicole, a White-appearing woman, noted that race (appearance) and culture (social practices and traditions) are different but often interchanged. Throughout her interview, Nicole argued that having a different skin color from the person she dates makes the relationship interracial, regardless of how race and culture get confused. The first part of Nicole's quote referenced a past relationship with a Black man; she transitions to discussing the recent relationship with a Romanian partner to exemplify a cultural difference rather than a racial difference. Other respondents discussed the salience of skin color but focused more on external assumptions.

> I would perceive any relationship that I was in as interracial but I would say other people, if they saw me dating a black person, they wouldn't think it was interracial. Like obviously, if you see me with a White person, that's probably the thing where people are just like that—they're like, "That's different. You don't see that a lot."
> (Autumn, 21, Black and White)

Although Autumn, a light-skinned non-White-appearing woman, also said that she saw all her relationships as interracial—even with another Black and White person—she made this assertion based on the fact that she, herself, is multiracial (what she sometimes referred to as "interracial"). She further argued, "I look Black, I must be Black, of course she's dating a Black person. They just think it's normal." Autumn drew distinctions between what people think within their relationships and what people think of the relationship externally. This is comparable to how racial identities are formed (Harris & Sim, 2002; Kramer et al., 2015; Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2008; Sims, 2016), as identity depends on both internal and external categorizations.

Skin tone was significant for women who described being consistently perceived as non-White, especially those mixed with Black (n = 15). India, a medium-skinned non-White-appearing woman, based interraciality on both racial identity and appearance: "I mean, I guess if I were dating a Black man or an Asian man I probably wouldn't consider it interracial. I mean, I guess it is, yeah." Reliance on shared racial identity allowed India to not view dating either a Black or Asian man as interracial. When I asked about White men, however, she said that it would: "I mean, just 'cause I'm not White and he's not Black or Asian." For Hispanic men, the boundaries India draws are both simple and complex,

> You know, like, I think this is the first time I've really thought about it. I think off the bat I wouldn't think of that as interracial because we're both people of color but I mean, technically, yeah, I mean, I'm not a Latina. I guess since we're both people of color, we're both kind of coming from

> like a sense of feeling like the other, where you know, we have distinct cultures that are you know, just "inside of us." [laughs] I guess because we're both kind of operating from a similar framework of being like… oppressed by White people so we understand like certain fundamental issues that you wouldn't get in a relationship with a White person.

India positioned herself as being in an interracial relationship or not based on some shared experience of the world as a person of color. She created a binary between those who are White and those who are non-White, rooted in skin color as well as a sense of being different based on cultural practices and experiences of systematic discrimination. Her note about distinct cultures "inside" was a nod to an earlier reflection on how White people are excited to hear that she is multiracial, telling her that she is "cool" for having all these different cultures "inside" her. India's understanding of her and other people of color's difference is based on White people framing her and others as racially/culturally different and more interesting. Yet, physical features still have primacy for India.

> I was thinking, well, if I dated a Black man, I wouldn't feel like that's an interracial relationship. But if I was dating an Asian man, I would—like an East Asian man—like maybe that would be interracial because you can see, I don't know, we're two different skin tones, we don't look alike. Even though we're both like coming from similar backgrounds. So yeah, I do get that if there's like uh you know, we both look alike like on a phenotypic level like then it's not interracial.

The distinctions drawn between herself and East Asian men based on appearance is important, considering that she knows that cultural differences could be present. Because there tend to be noticeable phenotypic differences between East Asians and South Asians, especially skin tone, India's imagining of herself and another Asian person looking different acknowledges that another South Asian person might not look different from her. Medium-skinned and darker skinned women in my sample were acutely aware of their skin color in ways that light-skinned women were not. For light-skinned women, skin color difference was dependent on their male partners being darker skinned; otherwise, they employed other logics to draw lines of difference.

Consistent with other findings (Bonam & Shih, 2009; Song, 2015), several women I interviewed determined that all relationships would be interracial unless the partner was the same racial combination. Allyson, a White-appearing woman, and India were the only two women who framed interracial relationships as only occurring with White people. This leads me to conclude that, for these multiracial women, what is or is not interracial is rooted in the moments of racial (mis)identification that many multiracial people contend with, most especially if their phenotype does not match up with what others expect a certain race to "look" like (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2008). With Nicole, skin color was not just significant as a way for her to make designations between herself and her partners but also as a way that her partners could make comments about her appearance. The latter only tended to happen with the Black men that Nicole had dated in college who had nicknamed her "Snow White" based on her fair skin and dark hair. So, women used skin tone as a way to say "this is an interracial relationship" and to strengthen ideas about race. This is most apparent in the ways that the people these women had romantic relationships with make or made light of their own skin color (e.g., one male partner calling my participant a "mocha princess"). Skin color is a means of identifying difference both to frame these relationships and to illustrate how race is reflected back onto these women by other people.

Culture: Drawing Cultural and Ethnic Distinctions

This frame strives to make distinctions between women and their partners despite having similar physical appearances. Similar to the distinctions British multiracials make in their relationships depending on ethnic and cultural identity (see the British vs. non-British discussion in Song [2015]), the notion of "culture" varied among my respondents depending on differences they drew between culture and race. Often, culture was framed as originating from people of color, and White dating partners were seen as either lacking in culture or having an incompatible culture:

> I think there were some ways that the values that I…draw from my mom's side of the family culturally—are values that they just did not end

> up sharing. There was certainly cross—they were certainly intercultural. [laughs] But I don't know how…it's hard for me to disentangle what of that was racial and what of it was cultural and I'm still not really quite sure I know how to distinguish the two from other stuff.
> (Lorena, 31, Chicana/Hispanic and White)

Lorena, a White-appearing woman, noted the importance of cultural values and feeling connected to land where her ancestors had experienced violence through colonization. There was consistent ambiguity over what of this difference was racial and what of it was cultural, even as Lorena remained confident that she and her White ex-boyfriend were different in some concrete way. Lorena admitted that although she had exclusively dated White men, she was not sure if she saw all of those relationships as interracial. This hesitance was due to Lorena having experienced shifts in her own identity, with her identity as Chicana becoming stronger in her 30s. Her efforts to disentangle racial and cultural difference was shaped by her current racial, ethnic, and political identity as a Chicana woman, illustrating the ways that this boundary-making is not static.

In what is likely a regional effect, nearly all the mixed Latina/Hispanic respondents and several other mixed-White respondents (n = 8) made explicit distinctions between types of whiteness along cultural lines when discussing potential partners:

> They're White White. One was of Italian descent, one can trace his lineage back to the first settlers. It's just that—because I do have a lot of Hispanic friends and such, and it's just the way that, it seems to me, that a lot of the community differentiates. Like the skin color; I'd be considered more of a White Mexican but there's also Euro White and then you have medium darkness Hispanic, you've got Native, and then Black.
> (Kaitlyn, 28, White and Mexican)

In this framing, Kaitlyn, a White-appearing woman, drew a distinct line between herself—a White Mexican—and her "White White" exes. She admitted that when walking down the street, no one would assume that she and a White man were different in appearance; yet, to her there was a clear cultural difference. The distinctions being made along skin color and cultural lines illustrate how individual physical appearance and racial identity impact frame usage. Despite the fact that multiracial women described having dated White men more than any other group—only one respondent (Anita) said she would no longer date White men—White-appearing women were the predominant users of the "cultural" frame, particularly to draw differences between themselves and men they referred to as "White dudes" and "gringo" Whites:

> Even so, a lot of times too, like, like I said growing up has to do a lot with my ethnic identity. Like how I grew up and who I can relate to and when I talk about like my parents' expectations or like how I grew up, it's just so different from these guys.
> (Gia, 22, Hispanic and Middle Eastern)

Gia, a White-appearing woman, drew differences between herself and the White men she dated via her understanding of her cultural background as well as the fact that her friends and family reaffirm these understandings with commentary on her potential romantic partners.

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

Despite appearing White to others, Gia and her family position themselves as culturally separate from non-Hispanic White people. Gia's mother deliberately used ethnicity and other cultural markers as an indicator of the qualities that men will bring into relationships with her daughter. The role of family members and friends in strengthening multiracial women's feelings about where difference does and does not lie is especially significant for those who are racially White within a U.S. racial structure despite being ethnically "non-White." However, the multiracial women who did not read as White to others—especially those mixed with Black—relied much more heavily on skin color and physical difference as their barometer of an interracial relationship. These women rarely said that partners who had similar appearances

or who shared some of their racial mixture were interracial because of some cultural difference, indicating that the ability to even claim a so-called cultural difference depends on having accessibility to whiteness in the first place (see Sexton, 2008; Waters, 1990).

Cousin: Contending With Familial Closeness/Non-White Familiarity as Undesirable

This frame revolves around the notion of non-White familiarity, specifically in the form of male family members, such as brothers, cousins, or perhaps a father or uncle. The frame is composed of two parts: first, the invocation of "he reminded me too much of my cousin" or some other male family member as a means of rejecting a partner, and second, that anyone who is not the exact same racial mixture counts as an interracial relationship. For this frame, multiracial women used notions of familial closeness as a means of determining whom they would not date, as that familiarity was undesirable, or who was not within their racial in-group.

The first part was the least common framework among my respondents ($n = 6$). The concern with familiarity was reserved for men of color, as no respondents ever indicated a concern over potential White partners reminding them of any White family members. When women did express a disinterest or hesitance with regard to White men ($n = 7$), it was because of possible racism or as Jada, a dark-skinned non-White-appearing woman, put it: "dating White men is basic, that's why I date Latinos." Yet, White men were not painted as broadly unattractive. Women invoking the "cousin" frame only used it to discuss why they could not date men with specific racial/ethnic backgrounds; these men were overwhelmingly East Asian or South Asian.

> This Indian guy, he was really nice. I was like, I'm gonna give it a try. And then we met and I heard his accent in person and I was just like [whispers] "I can't do this!"
> So, we had this really fun date and we went to a movie and we did bowling and we got food and then at the end of the night it was just like, "Sorry man, it was like hanging out with my cousin. We can't do this again." [laughs]
> (Shelby, 25, Indian and White)

Here, Shelby, a White-appearing woman, described how her date was fun and lasted quite a long time. Yet, this man was not worth seeing again due to having an accent. Furthermore, she described this man as reminding her of her cousin, making him an unacceptable partner. In perceiving this man as equal to male members of her family, Shelby suggested that to remind her of a male family member was to inspire revulsion. This disgust manifested even in her body language as she told the story, closing her eyes, whispering, shuddering, and then laughing in short bursts as she said "I can't do this" and "it was like hanging out with my cousin." The revulsion she both described and exhibited suggests that to date someone who is like family is uncomfortable.

Similar to several mixed-Asian respondents ($n = 4$), Shelby framed an accent as evidence of assimilation; very rarely was appearance what made a given partner unappealing. The discomfort with familiarity was tied to cultural assimilation, serving as proxy for how Americanized a potential partner may be and what kinds of politics they may bring into the relationship. Having an accent marks one an immigrant. In particular, assimilation into U.S. culture appears to be at the center of Shelby's (and other women's) romantic ideal, as she stated that she resisted dating men who are Muslim because she did not want to be pressured into being more religious or "traditional." In fact, she shared that she has a degree of anxiety when around other Indian or Pakistani people because she questioned their ability to communicate. In using Muslim faith and a South Asian accent as a marker of an undesirable "familiarity," mixed-Asian women articulated their desires to leave behind certain aspects of their families:

> …if somebody has an accent, I will not talk to them. If somebody cannot speak English properly, I will not talk to them. From like, Bengali culture, if they have, you know, like backwards views? I don't talk to them. And my parents don't seem to think that's a big deal. I mean, the fact of the matter is, neither of my parents have an accent. Nobody in my family has an accent. And everybody speaks English extremely well. …And I'm just like, how can you expect me to get with those people or to even talk to them. I can't have a conversation with them because they just have *no* idea what I'm talking about. So, my mom thinks I'm being picky.
> (Aidah, 27, multiethnic Bangladeshi)

Here, Aidah, a medium-skinned non-White-appearing woman, paired her disdain for accents with what she termed "backwards views," a preference that she stated her family calls her "picky" for. These statements aligned with earlier comments in her interview, where Aidah discussed "running away from brown people." The insistence that accents were problematic was odd given that Aidah never explained what accent it was that she was referring to and she seemed oblivious to the fact that she, too, had an accent similar to many other English-educated South Asian people I have encountered. Of course, every person has an accent, whether regionally speaking their "native" language or when speaking another language altogether; however, there is weighty value judgment placed on those perceived as "foreign" or members of a lower socioeconomic status and perceptible accents only reinforce those judgments (Dixon, Mahoney, & Cocks, 2002). Aidah framed her disinterest in men without a certain type of English-speaking accent as a result of them being unworldly, unlike her family, whom "all had doctorate's degrees" and highly valued education. She described her family as "middle class" and "classy," noting the family's ties to the Bangladeshi revolution, the United Nations, and being college professors. Despite all of this, as well as the fact that her brother married a White American woman, there was pressure on Aidah to marry someone "Muslim and brown." Aidah stated that she did not see herself "being that happy" if she married "someone *that* Muslim and *that* brown." Her desire to date someone who shared her family's class status but not their racial or religious characteristics was evident in the dating experiences she discussed; she described a Pakistani man she had recently gone out with as "shopping for a wife" and having "a big nose like [her] dad."

The statements that Aidah and Shelby made are clearly classed, as assimilation into U.S. or Western culture via the lack of a "discernable" accent connotes certain levels of education and social mobility. Rejecting men who reminded them of their male family members who still had accents or other characteristics was a rejection not only of familiarity but also a specific classed masculinity. Furthermore, several other women who did not identify as mixed-Asian expressed anti-Asian sentiments in terms of the men they could see themselves dating or sleeping with, mapping on to the observed patterns around desirability that marginalize Asian men seen in other studies (Lin & Lundquist, 2013; Lundquist & Lin, 2015; Spell, 2017). However, assimilation into broader U.S. culture was an underlying concern for many women, even if they did not state it explicitly, considering that accents, proficiency with English, and observance of the Islamic faith are symbolic indicators for non-Westernness or non-Americanness as well as stereotypically patriarchal. However, there were also milder alternatives to these xenophobic/Islamophobic assimilation logics.

> They're very like, that typical Persian where they're flashy and with their Mercedes and that's just off putting to me. I definitely judge them. I guess that's not so much their race…Because I know regular, just casual Persian dudes that are fine but I don't know. I'm not usually attracted to them. Or any Persian guys. I'm not sure why. (Rahel, 28, Persian and Mexican)

Rahel, a light-skinned non-White-appearing woman, initially framed her disinterest in Persian men as related to personality. She softened by stating that it was not about race, claiming she knew "regular" and "casual" Persian men who were tolerable and apparently, not stereotypical. However, she did not at any point mention that she had an attraction to Persian men who were "regular" either. When I asked why she was not attracted to Persian guys, she elaborated:

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

When Rahel said that dating a Persian man would be "that kind of weird," she was expressing anxiety around dating someone too close to the family, specifically her father. When I asked Rahel if she had a similar view toward Hispanic men, she immediately said no. Her rejection of Persian men was very specific and related to her father's, rather than her mother's, family.

Although no women indicated that reminding them of a White family member made a potential partner unattractive, those with White family members ($n = 13$) did discuss feeling some obligation to not exclude White people from their dating pool.

> I feel like I have a lot of distrust about White guys in general. I don't trust their intentions and I don't trust that they are telling me exactly how they feel or that they're attracted to me or that their attraction isn't fucked up in some way…Yeah, I will still go on dates. I will still go on dates with them. The uh—loneliness is a really powerful force for making you reach toward something that's not perhaps what you're intentionally looking for.
> (Allyson, 27, Hapa/White and Filipino)

Although White men did not appear to be what she would want in an ideal world, Allyson still gave them a shot. When asked if this willingness to be open to White men (despite disappointing her) stemmed from the fact that she has White family members, she enthusiastically stated, "Oh absolutely!" She claimed an ability to "speak to White interactions" assisted with this. White family members and apparent adeptness with the language of whiteness suggest a comfort that Allyson had no interest in discarding completely. Even so, when describing a date she had gone on with a Vietnamese American man, she expressed both amusement and disappointment.

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

Allyson's description of a man who could relate to her experiences growing up and who understood what it was like to be a marginalized person in a majority White city seemed to be what she was missing in her interactions with White men. And yet, this man who reminded her of her brother did not make it past the first date. Allyson's responses echo the concerns of Shelby—who also was turned off by the sound of someone's voice—as well as the "weirdness" that Rahel alluded to. That White men were never described as being unattractive due to a resemblance to family members indicates a deeper issue around race and attractiveness as well as perhaps the repercussions of racial segregation and ethnic enclaves in large cities and how these circumstances foster group (dis)loyalty (Alba & Nee, 2005). Some women who espoused these views had grown up in diverse immigrant communities such as Houston, whereas others had grown up in majority White areas such as rural Idaho; concerns about past or future partners seemed rooted in (a) internalized anti-Asian dating schema that rendered Asian men less attractive partners and (b) women wanting distance from family practices or structures that they found undesirable.

Rahel also described how she viewed interracial relationships as a multiracial woman, a perspective shared by a very small number of respondents ($n = 4$). The notion that interraciality exclusively involves being the exact same racial/ethnic mixture implied an inherent nature makes a multiracial person and another person different, even when they were "some of the same thing." Song (2016) has critiqued this logic, citing the need for frameworks that embrace shared identity. Yet, rather than shared race serving as a link between multiple racial and ethnic groups, as predominant U.S. cultural narratives suggest, multiracial women such as Rahel who argued that they are always in an interracial relationship render themselves a distinct racial group:

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

Rahel clearly noted the possibility of shared heritage, as many other women in this study also did. Yet, most women who cited a shared identity discussed this as meaning they and their partners looked similar in terms of skin tone or other physical features. Rahel's framing also played into the idea that when someone is mixed, race is no longer as significant. Prior to this statement, Rahel talked about "not feeling very Mexican or very Persian" and that she felt "very human, very beyond that." By invoking the notion that she was beyond these racial and ethnic categories, she articulated a desire to render race less significant or perhaps establish what scholars refer to as a "transcendent" identity (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2008).

Conclusion: Seeing Race, Framing Difference

Overall, I find that multiracial women use three ideological frames to distinguish what is and what is not an interracial relationship. By drawing attention to racial difference—via skin color and physical appearance—cultural difference, and concerns around classed and racialized familiarity, multiracial women uphold aspects of the dominant U.S. racial hierarchy. Multiracial women use these frames to discuss their own racial identities and how they construct the identities of their relationships around race by considering the perceptions of others, how they personally identify interracial relationships, and how they perceive other people defining interracial relationships. Although I break this analysis into three distinct frames, most of the women invoked several of these frames during the course of their interviews, sometimes using multiple in one answer. Therefore, these frames form a vocabulary for discussing race and relationships. Through these narratives, multiracial women engage with a colorblind logic around dating, repeatedly stating early in interviews that "race doesn't matter" or that they do not "see" race in their romantic relationships and later demonstrating that their everyday realities are not colorblind at all. Overall, the frames show the racial boundaries of relationships depend heavily on physical appearance, cultural ties, and a desire for assimilation and family connectedness.

For the multiracial women I interviewed, the tone of their skin influenced how they drew racial boundaries in which lighter skinned women made themselves distinct from partners with similar appearances based on what they called cultural difference. Despite many light-skinned women naming White partners in particular as being significantly different from them, nearly all of the women I spoke to expressed a preference for White men in the stories they shared of who they dated as well as who they pointed out to me on their dating apps. Furthermore, familiarity—in which multiracial women refer to how much potential partners remind them of male family members—becomes a means of ruling out relationships, overwhelmingly to the detriment of men of color. Thus, for multiracial women, the drawing of racial boundaries around being "of color" reinforces existing racial hierarchies and inequalities. Men of color are the partners that multiracial women can find a reason to exclude, whereas White men seem to be rarely put through such rigorous analysis. In fact, despite some women holding negative views of White partners, this did not always stop them from dating White men. Asian men and Black men were more often named as undesirable partners—invoking racial and gendered discourses about their masculinity or compatibility—or in the cases of some Black men, were explicitly desired for their sexual prowess, exemplified in one respondent referring to a "big, Black Nigerian" she maintained a sexual relationship with as a "reset button" between her committed, romantic relationships with White and Hispanic men.

Although it is important to note that these women are not alone in their internalization of racial, gendered, and fetishistic framings about potential partners, it is also necessary to engage these questions with multiracial respondents. Multiracial populations continue to grow, and their complex identities over their lives and in varied social contexts provide new opportunities for expanding our knowledge about how racial boundaries and degrees of intimacy (and the ties between race and intimacy) are (re)constructed. Given that this project focuses on women and is regionally specific as well as heteronormative, future avenues for this research include assessing multiracial men's and exclusively queer multiracial people's perceptions of interracial relationships, expanding to compare across regions and also contending with how increasingly more available technologies such as ancestry testing may be impacting relationship dynamics and how people come to conclusions about interraciality.

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