

Dating in the Time of #BlackLivesMatter: Exploring Mixed-race Women's Discourses of Race and Racism

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Abstract

The author explores the discourses and logics that self-identified multiracial and multiethnic female online daters use to explain their own responses to social justice movements around race and racism in the United States. These women mobilize stances on the social movement Black Lives Matter (BLM) as a metric of racial progressiveness, articulating their own political views on race. Furthermore, mixed-black women in particular describe using attitudes toward the BLM movement as a way to vet potential dating partners. The implementation of BLM as a tool in the contemporary dating “toolkit” suggests that the language around, and produced by, social movements (in terms of mainstream media coverage) influences the ways in which some women discuss race, gender, and racism. Using interview data from 30 in-depth interviews, the author shows how mixed-race women navigate racial politics on an interpersonal level during a time when U.S. media and popular culture is focused on issues of racism and state-sanctioned violence. The use of BLM as a rhetorical frame demonstrates how far the logics of colorblindness and antiblackness extend into everyday life and serves as a signifier of where individuals stand on significant social issues. By analyzing the ways multiracial women talk about dating, the author provides a greater understanding of the shifting meanings of race, racism, and the “postracial” in contemporary American society.

Keywords

multiracial women, racial discourse, colorblind racism, dating practices, racial politics

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

—Kai, 22 (Black and Asian)

I hate this Black Lives Matters movement. I hate that people say that we have a Black president. We should have a president. We should have *Lives Matter*. No, I really wish that

we were in a post-race society but we’re not and I don’t understand.

—Nicole, 28 (Irish and Native American)

In the present moment, race and racism are at the forefront of American minds. As Khury Petersen-Smith

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(2015) suggested, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has “shattered what remained of the notion of a ‘post-racial’ America,” forcing much of mainstream media to address, however ineptly, issues such as antiblack racism, mass incarceration, and police brutality. Because of the visibility of BLM as a movement and an organization, as well as affiliated large-scale protests, marches, and occupations, many Americans have had little opportunity to remain oblivious to contemporary issues around race in the United States. The near constant discussion of police(-ing) and BLM on major news networks and on social media provides rhetorical frames within which everyday conversations and understandings of race and racism operate. These frames are embedded with logic(s) of colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2013) as well as the rationalizing logic(s) around white virtue and defense of white privilege, what Joe R. Feagin (2000) termed the white racial frame. Focusing on these frames has implications not only for understanding how people talk about race but also for the ways in which people navigate forming and maintaining close relationships.

The current “national conversation on race”—which John Hartigan, Jr. (2010) described as the “sprawling, unwieldy, often maddening” means by which U.S. society evaluates and discusses what counts as “racial” (pp. x–xi)—seems most concerned with how whites and blacks are responding to BLM. Little media concern has been directed toward nonblack people of color and even less toward multiracial people, a population that is often invoked to signal racial progress. In fact, the notion of being beyond race is central to multiracialism, enabling U.S. society to rely on the beyond-race (and therefore beyond-racism) narrative to perpetuate white supremacy and antiblackness (Sexton 2008), protecting whiteness and maintaining, rather than challenging, the racial order. However, the continuing black-white binary understanding of race in U.S. media is concerning, considering that in 2015, two high-profile instances of police brutality and misconduct featured both a male multiracial victim of police violence—black and white 19-year old Tony Terrell Robinson, Jr.—and a male multiracial perpetrator of police violence—Japanese and white 29-year-old Oklahoma City police officer Daniel Holtzclaw. Tony Robinson’s death at the hands of a Madison, Wisconsin, police officer drew ire for several reasons, namely, the fact that the unarmed Robinson was shot seven times in the head and torso within three seconds (Vielmetti 2015) and that the offending officer was not prosecuted for use of force. Alternatively,

accusations against Daniel Holtzclaw of sexually assaulting 13 black women from a low-income neighborhood, including a grandmother of 12, drew both outcry against, and demonstrations of support for, Holtzclaw. Holtzclaw was ultimately convicted on 18 of 36 counts against him in December 2015, including four counts of first-degree rape (Larimer 2016).

Mainstream media’s attention to these cases revolved around whiteness and blackness, with coverage of Robinson’s family playing up how he was not *just* black and prominently featuring his crying white mother. Coverage of Holtzclaw lambasted him as a white man who had sexually assaulted black women while on duty; this narrative was reified when Holtzclaw was tried by an all-white jury of his peers. The BLM movement was central to how these two cases were addressed publicly, particularly in organizing protests in both Madison and Oklahoma City. In Holtzclaw’s case, these actions refocused attention on how police violence and antiblackness affect black women disproportionately (Morse 2016). It is in the midst of this current national conversation on race that sociologists must consider how individual-level relationships are being affected, especially among claims that American society is more progressive and that these atrocities are not about race, even as these polarizing stories center on perceived race based on phenotype and social status: a perceived blackness for Tony Robinson and a perceived whiteness for Daniel Holtzclaw.

In this article I explore the discourses and logics self-identified multiracial and multiethnic female online daters use to explain their own responses to the current social justice movements around race, racial inequality, state-sanctioned violence, and racism. The language around, and produced by, movements such as BLM influence how these multiracial women discuss race, racism, and inequality in the context of their intimate relationships. In particular, some women in my study use their own stances on the issues BLM and its offshoots address as a means of *vetting* potential dating partners, mobilizing stances on this social movement as a metric of racial progressiveness. My goal is to shed light on how people, specifically mixed-race women, are navigating racial politics on an interpersonal level during a time when U.S. media and popular culture are especially focused on issues of racism and state-sanctioned violence. It is critical to assess how aspects of everyday life, such as dating practices and the ways that people talk about social issues, are indicative not only of how people signify their politics but also how the shared meanings of race,

racism, and the so-called postracial are shifting in contemporary American society.

RACIAL DISCOURSE(S), SOCIALIZATION, AND THE CENTRALITY OF WHITENESS

Race is at the center of American life; in fact, Hartigan (2010:7) suggested that race is so routine that people are unconscious of the “pervasive conventions guiding our actions, words, and perceptions,” particularly the events and/or encounters that are deemed racial. The white-centric nature of race logics is what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2013) termed colorblindness or the new racism. Because social science and the average American citizen understand race along a white-nonwhite binary, many researchers focus on the behaviors of white people to determine social progress, such as the rate of out-marriage to people of color (Qian and Lichter 2011; Yancey 2002) or the ways in which whites talk about race (Foster 2009; Picca and Feagin 2007). As John Foster (2009:686) argued, the contradictions within the race discourse of white Americans place the blame on racial others for racial tension and preserves white privilege through a “selective racial consciousness” rooted in recognition of positive portrayals of whiteness. Thus, whites use discursive tools to simultaneously rationalize existing social structures and to appear open minded (p. 687).

These discursive tools, coupled with a colorblind ideology, facilitate the notion of equal opportunity and the notion that racism no longer exists or affects the life chances of racial minorities (Bonilla-Silva 2013). In the current political climate, colorblindness allows whites to posit that they, and police officers and the criminal-legal system, do not see race, allowing structural racism to continue via promotion of discourses of universal sameness and individual failure (Bonilla-Silva 2013; Feagin 2000). For many whites, if misbehaving black people would just obey, they would be able to walk away from encounters with law enforcement alive. This is not surprising, however, considering that many (white) Americans find the idea that police are anything but innocent and well-meaning people to be a shocking and incomprehensible notion (Lee and Gibbs 2015). It has consistently been found that race affects perceptions of, and attitudes toward, police (Associated Press–NORC Center for Public Affairs Research 2015; Roper Center for Public Opinion Research 2015) with concerns over accountability, police brutality, and training resulting in divisions between black and white Americans.

As Petersen-Smith (2015) noted, in 2014, the Ku Klux Klan openly rallied on behalf of Ferguson officer Darren Wilson and threatened lethal force against black protestors. Over the course of the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign season, Americans and others across the globe have witnessed Donald Trump supporters brutally attack BLM protestors (among others) during Trump’s campaign rallies, amid Trump’s polarizing and blatantly racist commentary in interviews, speeches, and debates.

Despite the litany of evidence that the United States is not postracial or beyond racism, we continue to see *possessive investment in whiteness* (Lipsitz 2006): a logic of individual liberalism that associates black grievances with making whites feel “guilty or unduly privileged” (p. 21). Jared Sexton (2008) noted that multiracialism actually “energizes white supremacy and anti-blackness through the effects of its subversion” (p. 20). Here, multiracialism relies on the construction of a pure racial whiteness that is disrupted through mixing with “otherness” (p. 19). So, narratives around a colorblind society get shored up by multiracialism, which acts as a means of both undoing whiteness and creating a society that is beyond race while also keeping the social power of whiteness firmly in place. This narrative of colorblindness is particularly strong in how the American populous discusses cross-racial dating and other intimate relationships. As Rainier Spencer (2014:166) explained, the “conservative consensus” of mainstream media continues to articulate the claim that multiracial people will move the U.S. into its “postracial destiny” in the hopes that repetition will make it true. Spencer noted specifically that postraciality is not so much the goal as postblackness.

Along these same lines, Bonilla-Silva (2013) argued that some multiracials are honorary whites, suggesting that those with white-reading privilege or who benefit from being nonblack people of color assist in the maintenance of an antiblack (tri)racial hierarchy. Kerry Ann Rockquemore and Patricia Arend (2002:59) stated that those who fall into this new whiteness are “culturally white” but can be barred from full inclusion within whiteness due to phenotype. Thus, the racial position for multiracial people is inconsistent, seemingly one of honorary whiteness or as part of the collective black, perpetuating a white-nonwhite binary of race. Although this binary is problematic, it is relevant when discussing dating dynamics, as several scholars (Curington, Lin, and Lundquist 2015; Hunter 2005; Rondilla and Spickard 2007) have noted that colorism—the system of (dis)advantage dependent upon skin color—facilitates the ability of partially white multiracials

to hold higher social status and to garner a so-called preference premium in online dating spaces (Curington et al. 2015). This is critical, as several of my respondents self-reported being perceived as *just* white, with more than half identifying in some way with whiteness. Furthermore, women consistently discussed how their skin color and hair texture informed how people understood them racially. Although there are significant differences in the life experiences of a person who identifies as Persian and Mexican versus one who identifies as black and Asian, I include this diversity of experiences to illustrate the varied experiences of mixed-race people in the United States.

Furthermore, connections to whiteness for some multiracial people facilitate being influenced by a *white racial frame* (Feagin 2000:25)—the racialized worldview that structures the ways in which people interpret and deal with everyday life—and engaging with *white racial discourses* (Foster 2009)—the race discourse in which whites rationalize unequal social structure(s) while trying to appear unbiased. Noting that multiracial people are not exempt from this white socialization is *not* to suggest that multiracials are exclusively those who are part white, as public opinion and much of the sociological literature would argue. However, even so-called multiple minorities are socialized in a society that is dependent upon these white racial logics to function. As several scholars state, early processes of self-identification are influenced by primary caregivers; when caregivers are white women, multiracial women are likely to identify more with whiteness to the exclusion of blackness, as well as to adopt particular behavior strategies and political attitudes that frame themselves as “normal” or “mainstream” (Brunsma 2005; Rockquemore and Arend 2002). Although my project includes multiracial and multiethnic women of a variety of backgrounds and the data here do not focus on childhood socialization, these findings illustrate the inherent antiblackness of multiracialism. As Rockquemore and Arend (2002) noted, the ability to become part of honorary whiteness is heavily dependent upon phenotype.

RACIAL ATTITUDES, ATTRACTIVENESS, AND VETTING STRATEGIES

Being perceived as attractive is raced and gendered, influenced by stereotypes about what a person will bring to a relationship. Various studies have shown that people across sexual orientations

discriminate against those considered the least racially and sexually desirable. Findings have consistently shown that black women and Asian men are the least likely to be messaged or have their messages returned on online dating Web sites (Lin and Lundquist 2013; McGrath et al. 2016), and on gay dating Web sites, gay men will use the language of “personal preference” to reject men of certain racial groups and body types (Robinson 2015). For multiracial daters, dating prospects have been found to improve, especially for those who identify as part white (Curington et al. 2015). The combination of physical appearance—where being lighter skinned may lead to greater success in romantic and sexual encounters—and the general antiblackness that allows those who identify as multiracial to be deemed more attractive regardless of phenotype (Reece 2016) makes it evident that the multiracial dating experience has some unique contours. Furthermore, various researchers have found that the racial segregation of neighborhoods, workplaces, and social networks influence attitudes toward intermarriage (Field, Kimuna, and Straus 2013; Perry 2013) as well as policies that address racial social issues. Therefore, the role of race in both dating and politics has significant overlaps, as we cannot ignore how race and skin color inform access to resources and dating pools or how race—intersecting with gender, sexuality, and class—work together to inform how people craft, and respond to, policy in the United States.

In light of these racialized dating dynamics, it is important to consider what people *do* to form romantic pairings. When people form close relationships, they develop strategies to guide their selections of partners. For instance, research has found that low-income black women pursuing cohabitating unions engage in a process of “vetting and letting” to ensure the well-being of their children (Reid and Golub 2015). Although this vetting of male partners is child focused, mothers are able to assess how certain partners will be as parents and can apply lessons learned from previous relationships. The deliberative nature of this vetting process illustrates the need for dating tools to assist in building functional relationships. The experiential differences between women who are white skinned or white appearing and those who are more brown skinned in terms of how to use the logic(s) of colorblindness to present their views on race clearly plays a role in how the women in my study articulate their views. Furthermore, how women are able to render a social occurrence as a tool in their dating toolkit speaks to the deliberative nature

of *vetting* as a process. As Hartigan (2010:11) stated, the media spectacles that form our national conversation on race reflect changing sensibilities regarding race and the “racial,” as well as both reinforcing and revising cultural precedents. The women in this study are not only engaging in the perpetuation of white and colorblind logics, they are also occasionally using the discourses and logics around the racial to determine who might be a viable dating partner. The fact that these women are multiracial might lead some to believe that there would be similar progressive stances on race, a narrative that is supported on a surface level by the repetition that “race does not matter” in terms of whom mixed-race women choose to date. However, the clear color-line division that characterizes my participants’ responses to the issue of racism illustrates the convoluted racialized and gendered dimensions of *which* women get to proclaim that race does not matter. The ways in which people are articulating their beliefs around race, especially when used as a tool to regulate their intimate lives, has important implications for not only the increasing political polarization of the United States (Anderson et al. 2014; Klofstad, McDermott, and Hatemi 2013) but also for illuminating how the racial inequality being witnessed online operates behind the veil of the digital screen. As Sharon Holland (2012:19) described, proximity and familiarity may not actually create the conditions to overcome racist practice; by examining dating behaviors and logics, my research works toward clarifying the ways in which racial difference is articulated, maintained, and replicated through intimate relationships.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA ANALYSIS

I rely on a grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2006), the systematic method of analyzing and collecting data to develop theories, relying on comparative, iterative, and interactive methodologies to better understand process(es). Additionally, I use a discursive analytical approach. As Foster (2009:691) argued, social scientists must analyze not only *what* people say but also *how* they say it and in what context. *Discourse analysis* refers to various forms of talk, image, and text. This analytical approach argues that (1) language is not a neutral means of describing or reflecting the world but rather is imbued with socially constructed meanings and (2) frames discourse itself as a form of action (Gill 2000). I focus on the ways in which multiracial and

multiethnic women articulate their perspectives on racial issues through myriad discourses that are currently being perpetuated in mass media and popular culture, as well as how they describe using BLM as a metric for evaluating racial politics.

My data consist of in-depth interviews with 30 women residing in three cities in Texas—Austin, Houston, and San Antonio—who use the Web site OkCupid for online dating. I contacted women who self-identify as multiracial and/or multiethnic in their dating profiles on the basis of the racial and ethnic options provided by OkCupid: Asian, Black, Hispanic/Latin, Indian, Middle Eastern, Native American, Pacific Islander, White, and Other. My inclusion of women who self-selected more than one racial or ethnic category for their dating profiles is in line with other research that explores multiracial online dating (see Curington et al. 2015; McGrath et al. 2016). Although the women who participated in this study identified themselves with two or more of these available options on OkCupid, this did not always translate to how they identified in person (see Table 1). Often, women had additional explanations or specific ethnic or national identities—such as Italian, Filipino, or Colombian—that they used to describe themselves in person that simply did not fit within the mechanisms OkCupid offers. Therefore, I use the identifiers women used during the interviews rather than the categories used online, in addition to the interchangeable use of multiracial and mixed race to refer to individuals who identify as belonging to more than one racial group (see Curington 2016).

My participants ranged in age from 18 to 40 years, with educational backgrounds including high school diplomas and associate’s, bachelor’s, or master’s degrees. Although all participants described experiences with dating men, the women I interviewed identify as straight, bisexual, pansexual, and polyamorous; a small number of participants were in some form of relationship at the time of the interview and thus did not identify as single, though they still had active OkCupid accounts. Women did not need to be single or in a relationship at the time of the interview to participate; they simply needed to have active accounts at the time of recruitment.

I conducted interviews between June 2015 and May 2016. I approached potential participants via OkCupid’s messaging system using an institutional review board–approved standard script. Participants had the opportunity to inform me that they did not actually consider themselves multiracial—despite selecting multiple categories—during this recruitment phase before moving on to interviews. I performed

Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics of Respondents.

Pseudonym	Age	Reported Racial Identity	Educational Attainment
Aidah	27	Bangladeshi (Pakistani and Iranian)	Bachelor's Degree
Allyson	27	Hapa/White and Filipino	Master's Degree
Anita	30	Black and Afro-Latina	Bachelor's Degree
Audre	23	Black 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	Bachelor's Degree
Jacinta	24	Black and White	Bachelor's Degree
Jada	22	Black and Native American	Associate's Degree
Janet	23	Black and European (Italian)	Bachelor's Degree
Kai	22	Black and Asian	Bachelor's Degree
Kaitlyn	28	White and Mexican	Master's Degree
Lark	24	Jewish and Native American	Master's Degree
Leilani	28	Black and Korean	Bachelor's Degree
Lorena	31	Chicana/White and Hispanic	Master's Degree
Makaela	35	Biracial/Black and White	Bachelor's Degree
Marie	26	Arab and White	Bachelor's Degree
Monique	18	American Black, White, Native American	High School
Nicole	28	Irish and Native American	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

these semistructured in-depth interviews in person. They lasted between 2 and 4.5 hours, averaging 2 hours 45 minutes, and participants were not compensated for their time. I transcribed interviews, leaving grammar and syntax uncorrected; this is in line with Bonilla-Silva's (2013:117–19) transcription methods that allow the demonstration of “rhetorical incoherence” when talking about race. Although the focus of these interviews was the role of race in these women's dating lives, many women shared their thoughts on what they called “current events” in response to my questions regarding race and how these events would or would not be discussed on dates or with their friends and families. It became clear that the women in my study were being influenced by mass media coverage and representation of the BLM movement, as they would mention “the protests,” “that police stuff,” “Ferguson,” or “Charleston” as I asked open-ended

questions about what “postracial” meant to them and whether they could recall any meaningful or relevant conversations about race. Therefore, my analysis focuses on the discursive frames that these women use to explain their own political stances around race and racism in the United States, as well as how they feel about potential dating partners' positions on these issues and the implications that those stances have for their perceived dating opportunities in central Texas.

FIGHTING AGAINST THE EXTREMES: DISCURSIVE FRAMES AND LOGICS ON RACE AND RACISM

As illustrated by the epigraphs that open this article, a common concern among the mixed-race women I

interviewed was a fear of existing on the (political) extremes. The women in this study frame their commentary on racism, inequality, and violence either through the language provided by movements such as BLM or in the discourses that oppose them, mostly perpetuated through mainstream media coverage. The discourses around what counts as racial inequality have become salient in the realm of politics. As Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (2016) noted, invoking coded language around race is a ubiquitous strategy among professional politicians, liberal and conservative alike. Taylor argued that Mayor Rahm Emanuel and President Barack Obama are just as inclined to normalize and legitimize language that suggests that black culture is “defective”—pushing forth “policing, prevention, penalties, and parenting” as the way to curb gun violence and juvenile crime—as are the leaders of the Republican Party (p. 26). Pressure from BLM activists has even pushed some presidential candidates, such as former secretary of defense Hillary Clinton and Senator Bernie Sanders, to riff on structural racism and white privilege in debates, in addition to inclusion of these concepts as part of their campaign platforms (Gold 2016).

Seeking a Middle Ground

It should not be surprising that the average person’s thinking on race has shifted alongside these more public discourses. Often, the women in this study described trying to find a *middle ground* to exist in, so as not to fall at the so-called extremes. Here, *middle ground* refers to an area of compromise, a means of merging aspects of two opposing positions. Kai, a 22-year old who identifies as black and Asian, states that the opposing “sides” pit being colorblind and not pushing race issues on (presumably white) people against being aggressive about race and “not watering down” one’s views. So, the middle ground is space that actively works to avoid creating discomfort. This discomfort seems to stem from issues deemed political. Few women explicitly mentioned any political party affiliation, though several described themselves as fairly liberal or occasionally used identifiers such as feminist. However, many women, especially those who talked about being white reading in appearance, expressed contradictory politics over the course of their interviews. In one moment, a respondent would explain her concerns about gender inequality—such as equal pay or the more localized issue of access to reproductive health care that has been slashed by Texas House

Bill No. 2—and in the next moment share stories about how she was against affirmative action or that she believed that there was unfair treatment being directed at white people, especially those in law enforcement. After attesting that “race doesn’t matter” in terms of dating, women would then begin to list characteristics that either explicitly or implicitly had to do with race. This oscillation between political and social justice extremes was a defining characteristic of these interviews and decidedly so for the women who were not part black. For instance, Nicole, a 28-year-old who identifies as Irish and Native American, states that she recognizes that there are “statistics out there” that suggest that Black or Hispanic people might face challenges that she does not, while lamenting that the United States was not a postracial society:

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

The fear of being on the extremes is racialized and gendered. For people of color, to be considered too concerned with race and racism leads to assumptions about bias and investment in being a victim. For women, to be extreme, politically or otherwise, is often to be viewed as being emotionally unstable, especially around issues of gender inequality. Women are increasingly socialized to hedge or temper their opinions and politics to be more readily accepted; for women of color, the desire to not appear aggressive or “bitchy” is especially high (Collins 2005). Thus, the middle ground provides a way to escape being associated with negative stereotypes along racial and gender lines, as well as means of keeping dating options open. Previously, Nicole had noted that she wished a middle ground were achievable, as she avoids “specifically looking for racial injustice” because of her concern being more focused on other issues:

Because the thing is, while I’m not specifically looking for it—if I’m specifically looking for

racial injustice, I might find it more. Since I'm not specifically looking for it, I don't think I see it that often. Although, I listen to NPR, I read articles, and I hear things like Black males are inproportionately, you know, found guilty of crimes and sentenced to prison. I just know that that's a statistic out there that exists, but I'm not doing anything about it. . . . I've never been a person in any subject matter to go for one extreme or the other extreme. I feel like there's a middle ground for the solution to the problem and I feel like maybe I'm looking for the middle ground and I haven't found it yet.

Nicole was not alone in her assessment that extremes are undesirable. Many expressed a repeated desire for diversity, though what diversity meant for them was not always clear. Most often, it felt that the women I spoke with were drawing on the logics of what Sara Ahmed (2012) termed a public relations of diversity, whereby notions about equality and diversity are perpetuated and speaking about racism explicitly is viewed as problematic. The women in my study seemed concerned with representational diversity—a visibility of different kinds of people, often based on race and physical appearance—rather than a diversity that challenges or undoes systemic inequality. This language of diversity serves to establish and maintain good will, which may be what these women are referring to when they describe trying to locate the middle ground. As these women describe it, to be in the middle on racial issues is not necessarily to be a moderate, which has political undertones, but to at least be capable to compromise or understand both sides. Thus, these women desire to be perceived as open minded. Although the middle ground is often referenced by academics as a political concept, many women wanted to remove themselves from the realm of politics in terms of affiliation(s) with political parties or platforms. However, this middle ground also calls to mind the notion of multiracial people's being a *bridge* between communities, a common narrative that suggests an inherent ability of mixed-race people to connect (with) people across racial divides. Although the notion of the bridge depends on multiracial people's having a better understanding of different racial groups because they (assumedly) having parents of different races, it also requires a friendliness and eagerness to do the work of connecting others. In fact, researchers have suggested that black biracial adolescents are more adept at bridging friendships between black people and persons of other races compared with black or white

adolescents (Quillian and Redd 2009). This narrative also became central to the tenure of President Obama, with many hoping his election signaled a "more perfect union" and the beginning of a "postracial" society (Dariotis and Yoo 2012). Although the bridge certainly operates in the same realm of optimism as the middle ground, the bridge describes a capability specifically associated with multiracial people. Perhaps, too, this middle ground is an internalization of multiracialist narratives that suggest that to be on the racial or political extremes (e.g., identifying too closely with blackness or calling out antiblackness) is to not be beyond race or not actively pursuing a postracial future.

Logics of Antiracism and Desiring Diversity

Many other women expressed contradictions depending on which identities—race, gender, sexual orientation, or class—were considered the most important to them. The intersections of varied identities not only inform political views but also shape dating experiences. In particular, multiracial women's responses varied along skin color and other aspects of physical appearance. More white-skinned respondents, particularly those who are not of black descent, had less positive reactions to BLM, despite identifying as feminist or liberal. This indicates a conditional kind of liberalism or feminism, in which certain social issues fall outside the realm of acceptability as these issues affect how women may be perceived. As noted earlier, colorism enables partially white multiracials to hold higher social status and gain preference in dating spaces. Women with more brown skin and more coarsely textured hair would discuss how their racialized physical appearance affected their confidence in navigating dating much more often than white-appearing women, who often talked only about their levels of fitness as what might deter potential partners (rather than skin tone, hair texture, or other features such as a "black booty"). Therefore, it makes sense that lighter skinned women would embrace political and social stances that allow them to maintain their desirability. Furthermore, it is important to note that racial identities are accompanied by different notions about sexuality and gender behavior; there were notable differences in how women conceptualized gender (in)equality on the basis of what they felt was the most pertinent. For those women who were white appearing, the pay gap or their boyfriends' expectations that they cook, clean, and maintain fit bodies were much more important concerns than

antiblack racism or police brutality, which browner skinned women viewed as a central to their understandings of how a partner would treat them. This speaks to the ways that race, both personally identified and perceived, as well as gender and class intersect to inform stances on issues. Corinne, a 31-year-old who identifies as Korean and white, shared that she is not interested in supporting black-focused movements, because she concerns herself with “Korean stuff.” Instead, she conveys her support by noting how her black male friend works for the empowerment of black people and that she is “usually on his side”:

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

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

Alternatively, several women were not concerned with the diversity issues inherent in police violence but rather with the so-called appropriate behavior of those interacting with the police.

According to Kaitlyn, a 28-year-old who identifies as white and Mexican, if someone is “acting stupid,” then an officer can only assume he or she is on drugs and is dangerous:

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

Kaitlyn invokes some liberal talking points with her suggestions that officers “not go for the kill shot right away” or that police personnel need better training. These statements may not vilify police officers but they clearly advocate for some structural change in terms of how policing should operate. This attitude is reflected in the assortment of legislative interventions being pushed across the country in an effort to achieve greater accountability for instances of brutality and to facilitate more friendly police-community relations. However, Kaitlyn also uses antiblack logic that implies that those killed by police are deserving aggressors. Kaitlyn's commentary seems to blend the stances of those who support police officers and those who recognize that (some of) the violence that has been meted out against black people is wrong. However, virtually all of the women who oppose BLM rely on a “some bad apples” logic, suggesting that instances of brutality or misconduct are rare and anomalous, to make a case for why the movement is overly sensitive. When Kaitlyn notes that the violence is on both sides, she equates institutionalized, state-sanctioned violence against citizens with the supposedly more egregious violence that everyday citizens can do to one another. It is evident that this contemporary movement, although

perhaps not solely responsible for shifts in personal or political identities, provides a means of discussing broader social issues.

Dodging the “White Guy Attitude”: The Logic of Vetting Dating Partners

In addition to using BLM as a way to talk about race and racism broadly, mixed-race women also specifically use the movement as a way to select preferable dating partners, a practice I label a *vetting strategy*. BLM provides a cultural touch point for women in my study to articulate their feelings about race in the United States, much like the arrest of six black teenagers in Jena, Louisiana, for assaulting a white teenager (the Jena 6) or the arrest of Professor Henry Louis Gates for simply trying to enter his home after losing his keys. These “race stories” and how they are displayed, consumed, and debated shape our assumptions about, and perceptions and experiences of, what Hartigan (2010) called “the racial” (p. 10). Hartigan noted that the racial can often seem ambiguous and rife with disagreement; however, for the multiracial women who consider their potential dating partners’ views on issues of race and racism, it is clear that these women have specific ideas about what counts as “racial.” Many women described already having conversations about race with their friends and family, so those who did want to bring up race with dating partners often had prior preparation for how to talk about a contentious issue like race with someone they care for. As Kai notes, being capable of discussing current events, especially what she describes as “race things and cultural identity,” is of great importance for a boyfriend:

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

Kai perceived the man she was dating to have the skills and knowledge to have an intelligent conversation on race and politics. Her response implies that

someone incapable of making informed commentary on race would not be someone she is interested in dating. On the basis of the rest of her interview, this is related to the fact that Kai is half black and strongly identifies with her blackness. This became more salient as she acknowledged the antiblackness that plagues many Asian communities, particularly things she had heard from other people in school. Although Kai did not indicate that her own Asian family members—who are Vietnamese and Chinese—had ever expressed any antiblack sentiments to her, it seemed pretty clear that dating someone who was not racist, but especially someone who was not antiblack, was important. The concerns around antiblackness are tied to Kai being what she described as visibly brown skinned. Unlike several other mixed-Asian women I interviewed, Kai was consistently recognized as a racial Other (i.e., nonwhite). Kai’s visibility as a (mixed-)black woman were critical for how her sexuality and gender presentation were viewed, as she noted being concerned about being called a “mocha princess” by men she dated and worried about the assumptions men would make about her Asian-ness in terms of hypersexuality or demureness.

Similarly, Allyson, a 27-year-old who identifies as white and Filipino, discusses the difficulties she has had getting past what she terms “white guy attitude,” which she considers devoid of antiracist and antisexist politics. In fact, she states that she is more likely to trust a man of color than a white guy, even going so far as to suggest that white men are unsafe:

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

When Allyson says that she is more likely to want to meet a man of color and to feel safer around him, she is making assumptions about the politics that man of color would have in the current moment. Presumably, a man of color will not question that racism is real or that there may be a structural system that oppresses some social groups in the United States. It is telling that Allyson, who described herself as a “white privileged mixed-race Asian American,” has a negative

outlook toward white men, even as she noted that approximately 80 percent to 90 percent of the men who message her on OkCupid are white and that most of the men she has dated have also been white. Allyson seemed to both acknowledge the problematic lack of diversity in her own dating practices and resign herself to the racialized power dynamics of OkCupid and other dating platforms that tend to privilege white men. For Kai and Allyson, white masculinity has a particular meaning in this political climate. These women expect that the white men they may consider dating should have a certain *racial literacy*—the racial socialization and antiracist training that defends against and counters racism (Twine 2010)—and appear hard-pressed to consider dating (white) men who are not at least marginally versed in antiracist discourse and logics. It is well documented that politics, of the conservative or liberal variety, influence the dating practices of monoracial people (Klofstad, McDermott, and Hatemi 2012, 2013). In fact, among conservative black and white online daters, people were overwhelmingly more likely to select same-race partners compared with liberal daters (Anderson et al. 2014). Although this is clear evidence of homophily (McPherson and Smith-Lovin 1987)—the tendency to associate with similar others—and the ways in which people maintain cohesive social networks, it also suggests that people aim to date people who are similar (Joyner and Kao 2005; McClintock 2010). Here, Kai and Allyson do not suggest that white men are similar others; however, these men could become similar (enough) and viable dating partners if they are able to articulate antiracist politics. This is not necessarily a requirement for all potential partners, as several women, Kai and Allyson included, often assume that men of color will just *get* that racism exists. So, white men are tasked with providing proof that they “get it,” much of which is proved through how they engage with discourses around race and racism.

Other women stated, however, that although they care about politics, they would not feel comfortable bringing these issues up on a date. Yet getting men to share their thoughts on “what’s going on” is a means of determining whether a person is compatible in other areas. As Jacinta, a 24-year-old who identifies as black and white, states, it is not so much about politics as it is about “caring” when it comes to considering whether someone is dateable:

Well, not really politics, although if you’re for Donald Trump just GTFO [get the fuck out] like I can’t, I have no patience. And it’s the same

people who have . . . apathy towards the racial climate. That is a huge, *huge* turnoff. ‘Cause it started about last year or the year before . . . like the Ferguson thing. . . . then it was the “I Can’t Breathe” and then the pool party [in Dallas]! I showed the pool party to one of the guys and he was just like “well, I mean . . .” and I was like “what do you mean, ‘well, I mean’? That’s awful, that’s disgusting, she’s just a kid!” If you don’t even care about that we’re probably not going to agree on other things. And I want someone to—I’m not saying we have to, like I want to lead the parade or the march but—to at least respect that pain that we’re experiencing with it as a community and to agree that something needs to be done.

For Jacinta, “what’s going on” did not seem to matter much until about two years prior to our interview, correlating with the rise in BLM demonstrations in Ferguson, Missouri, and Cleveland, Ohio, in addition to the increased coverage of these actions by mainstream media outlets. Jacinta’s relatively glib comment on not wanting to “lead the parade or the march”—suggesting that to participate in activist demonstrations is too political and certainly not something she would ask of someone she was dating—indicates that she does not wish to appear too sensitive. Although her comments do not necessarily negate that *someone* should be doing the political labor of protesting, it seems that she is navigating a fine line of problackness. For Jacinta, it is a base-level expectation that someone would have some opinion on the current racial climate in order for her to better determine how she would get along with this person in other areas of their lives.

CONCLUSION: WHY TALKING ABOUT RACE (IN THE TIME OF #BLACKLIVESMATTER) MATTERS

As Hartigan (2010) concluded, some racial incidents will “stand out” in public culture longer than others, forming part of the “repertoire that commentators rely on to explain other such stories” (p. 190). The fact that the commentators who are most often given space to discuss these stories are white only strengthens the entrenched nature of logics of antiblackness, colorblindness, postraciality, and in the case of BLM white innocence and white ignorance (Mills 2007). White ignorance encompasses the spread of misinformation—about race, among

other things—and the social practices that encourage this (mis)interpretation; because the multiracial women in my study do not exist outside of a society determined by white supremacy, it is to be expected that they would use the language(s) and logic(s) of whiteness to explain themselves. Mills (2007) noted, “Sexism and racism, patriarchy and white supremacy, have not been the *exception* but the *norm*” (p. 17, emphasis in original). Because viewing the world through a white (heterosexual male) lens is the norm, using the discourses of whiteness is practically unavoidable.

The moments that define the contours of the national conversation on race are not only influencing how the media performs its coverage of inequality or how politicians move to address race as a component of their campaigns and platforms. The “racial” affects our everyday lives, particularly the highly racialized, classed, and sexualized process of dating, online and offline. I argue that multiracial and multiethnic women rely upon narratives around racism, police brutality, and state violence to articulate their own feelings on the current state of race in America, as well as how others may respond to them as a result of their positions. By using specific language related to BLM and the movement’s opposition—with discussions of the “racial climate,” which lives “matter” or “cops versus people”—it is evident that there is a racial grammar that shapes how these women see (or do not see) race in everyday life and particularly how important that perception is to them in terms of dating. The fact that some women use the discourses around racial incidents, as well as the incidents themselves, to get to know more about their potential dating partners illustrates the significant ways in which the “invisible weight of whiteness” (Bonilla-Silva 2012:176) is unequally borne. Disconcertingly, this vetting strategy is most commonly used by browner skinned multiracial women, illustrating the continued burden that blackness places upon people to not only provide solutions to racial problems but to be concerned with them in the first place. Women who did not describe experiencing the ability to pass into whiteness uninhibited appeared to have an awareness of the ways in which their skin color—and subsequently, their race—enabled a more critical and nuanced assessment of whiteness and issues of race in the United States.

The fact that many white-passing respondents were content to say that they cared about diversity in the abstract and rarely, if ever, described pushing their dating partners or other people in their lives to

questions their stances on race exemplifies the erotic nature of racism (Holland 2012) and how vicious logics of the “racial” infiltrate the relationships that could have some potential for achieving social change. If racial grammars and frames are transmitted through social interaction, are romantic relationships not a place to challenge or, perhaps, rework them? Indeed, several of these white-appearing women discussed dating men who were blatantly antiblack (with some of these men even confidently calling themselves racists) for years. There was no breaking up with these men or challenging them on their racist beliefs; for these white-appearing women, the deal breaker was less about how these men thought about race and more about how they placed certain traditional gender expectations on the relationship. How is it possible for race to not matter and yet, some women ignore the ways in which it clearly matters to their partners? That any women, but especially the postracial harbingers known as mixed-race women, would continue dating racist men because “it’s just their opinion” or “they have good reason” is concerning for several reasons, namely, for how it illuminates how average people are responding to racial matters more broadly as well as to BLM and other related social movements specifically. Furthermore, I argue that people are implementing particular racial rhetoric in their everyday lives. The discourses and logics around BLM are further evident in the ways in which Muslim and Arab women in my study discussed their growing concerns with navigating Islamophobia in their dating lives. Much like the mixed-black women who worry about the repercussions of sentiments around BLM for their safety or desirability, Islam-practicing women and mixed-Arab women have to contend with either fetishization or blatant threats. In one disturbing story, a mixed-ethnicity Bangladeshi woman had a long-time boyfriend call her a terrorist for not drinking alcohol at a bar. It is clear that the ways in which people bring race into the quotidian, particularly those interactions with romantic potential, increase the possibility of continuing to reproduce much of the polarizing politics and inherently unequal social structures that made BLM necessary in the first place.

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