# Introduction

Quotidian racism in the American tradition might be
dependent upon economic and political relations, but it
escapes our notice when such relations turn their attention
to the procreative possibilities of our erotic lives.

Sharon Holland, 2014

In the 1967 movie *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner,* a White woman brings
home her Black fiancé to meet her unsuspecting but liberal-minded parents.[1] Released just fifty years after the Ku Klux Klan–idealizing film *Birth
of a Nation* and just six months after antimiscegenation laws were struck
down by the Supreme Court decision in *Loving v. Virginia,* the movie was
as radically provocative as it was acclaimed. Fast forward fifty years, and
we must ask, Is the topic of interracial dating noteworthy anymore?

   At least in popular culture, interracial relationships feature across a
multitude of celebrity romances, from Serena Williams and Alexis
Ohanian to Prince Harry and Meghan Markle, and they are no longer rare
in popular television shows and films. A remake of *Guess Who's Coming to
Dinner* was released more recently, to little notice or acclaim (note to
Hollywood producers: when Sidney Poitier's character is played by Ashton
Kutcher, you know you've lost some political edge). Yet, beyond Hollywood,
interracial unions remain rare in the United States. When they do occur,
they are far from universally accepted, often evoking deeply fissured
debates around gender, race, and sexuality. We decided to write this book
because we wanted to understand why.

To social scientists the internet—and the social commentary it fosters—can open a window into what people are really thinking. Amid easy (if incomplete) anonymity and low consequences, people often reveal their innermost, atavistic thoughts and beliefs, especially in moments when they are emotionally charged or under the influence of substances.[2] Thus, the internet provides a powerful lens through which we might see how ordinary people think about sensitive issues such as race, gender, and sex. Their commentaries and comments show us how many people are still scandalized by interracial relations.

Among recent controversies we can point to a 2013 Cheerios commercial in which General Mills featured what appeared to be an interracial family enjoying their breakfast cereal. It was removed from YouTube because so many viewers were enraged by the depiction—and so many racial slurs punctuated the user comments below the video.[3] Another advertising kerfuffle arose around an Old Navy sale promotion in 2016. This spot's biracial family prompted a similar barrage of bigoted responses on Twitter, with the #LoveWins hashtag arising as a sort of counterprotest.[4] These spontaneous expressions of internet racism are not isolated examples but symptoms of a long-simmering problem.[5] The rise or, more accurately, rearticulation of racist and xenophobic fear in this country has emerged, in part, in backlash to the BlackLivesMatter movement and in support of the "Make America Great Again" era of political and personal expression. Racial fear and antipathy and the desire to police strict ethno-racial boundaries are not relics of the past but apparently indelible features of U.S. life.

Intimate life often falls outside the realm of public attention because it is seen as a private affair and it seems, on its face, unremarkable. Indeed, intimate relations are the one remaining area of race relations that, while having received particularly intense scrutiny and regulation in the past, have become obscured from the public. In this book we look at the way race, gender, and desire come together in shaping people's private life in a society that has yet to fully acknowledge or remedy systemic racial oppression.

Much of our research takes advantage of the specific platform of online dating, drawing anonymized data from millions of online interactions to observe how U.S. Americans react to others of different races when their

actions are not under the watch of their friends and families. In combination with a separate sample of seventy-seven in-depth interviews with daters of various racial backgrounds and a multitude of archival and secondary sources, we show that interracial relations are not nearly as harmonious in twenty-first-century U.S. life as Hollywood might paint them. At the same time, our research also points to something optimistic: the unprecedented access online dating offers people to find partners different from themselves holds tremendous potential for change in a society that is otherwise still racially segregated.

Online dating has created one of the few remaining public arenas in U.S. society in which it is common to openly express racial preferences—and exclusions. Many daters we interviewed described such preferences as simple matters of attraction, something natural and uncontrollable that, presumably, falls outside the realm of racial prejudice. As one White dater insisted, "Just because you wouldn't want to date someone doesn't mean you're going to culturally oppress them."

But narratives about personal choice have long since obscured prejudice, fear, and desires for segregation. They elide the deep, pervasive impact of historical antimiscegenation sanctions and overstate the equality of contemporary society. They glide past the deep fissures of racial marginalization reflected in and encouraged by centuries of legislation and social practice. Despite what we may tell ourselves, mate preference is never completely personal, nor is racial taste in romantic partners inconsequential. Racial dating preferences may *feel* as though they are natural and vary according to personal taste, but these preferences, in fact, have predictable, systematic patterns that reflect the shameful roots of racism in the United States.

This book connects the evolution of online dating today to the invention of dating in the early twentieth century—a new form of courtship that diminishes familial and state control over intimate choice. This and the growing emphasis of individualism together paved the way for present-day acceptance of racial discrimination in dating. As a form of courtship, dating originated just as the U.S. racial categories we know today were being solidified and regulated through laws and everyday practice. Ironically, this meant that the birth of individual preference and the modern notion of romance were deeply imprinted with racialized desire and

calculus. We interrogate the presumption that such preferences are indeed personal and benign, revealing them as the product of exclusionary social constructs that interlock courtship, race, gender, and sexuality.

While we situate the popularity of online dating within the evolution of racialized patterns of courtship, we also find that racial discrimination online has formed a distinct manifestation of racism. Even though deeply rooted in the past, the new form of racism interacts with fast-evolving technologies in ways that produce experiences and consequences distinct from traditional racism. We build from Patricia Hill Collins's concept of "new racism," which operates heavily with the propagation of harmful ideas and images of people of color within the mass media and through the politics of the post–civil rights era.[6] We also draw from Sonu Bedi's work on digitized "private racism," defined as racialized injustice that transpires in the private sphere of the internet, and Ruja Benjamin's work on the New Jim Code, or "the employment of new technologies that reflect and reproduce existing inequities but that are promoted and perceived as more objective or progressive than the discriminatory systems of a previous era."[7] We argue that the contemporary context of neoliberalism, consumerism, *and* the rise of new digital technologies give rise to a unique form of digital-sexual racism—one that disguises enduring racial discrimination in intimate life as nothing more than idiosyncratic individual preference. These "individual preferences," in the meantime, massively and systematically segregate cyberspace, reinforce categorical thinking, and police digital self-presentation, all without the need of in-person avoidance and confrontation.

In fact, even though online dating has the potential to democratize courtship, it has, so far, failed the promise. We illustrate how racial divisions are in fact reproduced through and within the cyberspace context of online dating. Just like how antimiscegenation laws codified racial categories throughout much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, twenty-first-century online-dating apps and websites maintain the divide with "ethnic" categories and filtering mechanisms. The seemingly immense opportunity of these platforms demands an efficient search method that comes with constant categorization of people based on markers (skin color, eye shape, hair texture) that are tied to social categories of ascribed difference (race, gender, etc.) As argued by Brandon Robinson, this new racism allows users to filter or ignore entire groups of people on the basis

of those markers, yet it remains invisible from the public eye.[8] At the same time, the anonymity fosters aggressive forms of sexual racism that rarely occur in face-to-face courtship markets. We call this "digital-sexual racism," a distinct form of new racism mediated through the impersonal and anonymous context of online dating.

While new technology promises their users greater personal freedom, we argue that the promise is laden with racism and sexism that generate systemic exclusion and alienation. The neoliberal language of individual choice is part and parcel of current digital technologies that have become so deeply ingrained in our lives that they amplify, reinforce, and rationalize oppressive social relations.[9]

Our analysis makes clear that race is the most important predictor of how White daters select whom to date. More often than not, White daters ignore the overtures of racial and ethnic minority daters with (conventionally) more desirable education background, height, and body type, while being responsive to those without similar qualities but are White. Some racial and ethnic minority daters develop strategies to navigate this racially hostile dating world, while at other times they themselves internalize and reproduce this pervasive digital-sexual racism. These findings suggest that, as online-dating technologies increasingly replace local, in-person markets of romantic interaction, daters use these private tools free from social sanction to even more efficiently apartheidize their dating experiences.

## WHAT IS THE CURRENT STATE OF INTERRACIAL INTIMATE UNIONS?

U.S. Americans have altered their public stance dramatically on interracial marriage since the midtwentieth century. In 1958, the first time Gallop ran an opinion poll that asked U.S. Americans whether they approved of marriage between Whites and non-Whites, 96 percent of respondents voiced disapproval. By 2013 that portion was only 13 percent (see figure I.1 for trends over time). Strikingly, Black Americans have always been far more supportive of interracial marriages than Whites. The gap, to be sure, has narrowed significantly, but the overall difference is still substantial. In the late 1960s about half as many Black Americans as
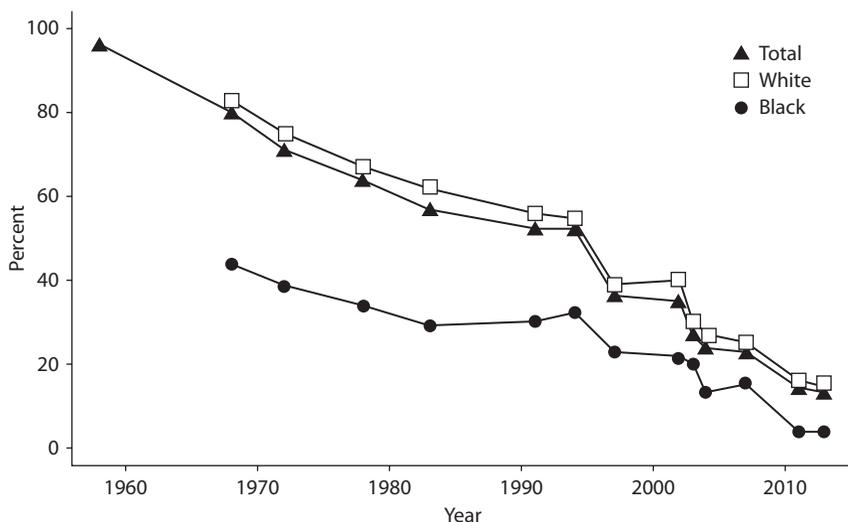
*Figure I.1.  Disapproval of Intermarriage between Whites and Non-Whites.* In 1969 Gallop began separating survey responses by race identity. *Source:* Calculated by authors using Gallop polling data accessed from Jones and Saad, "Gallup Poll Social Series."

Whites disapproved of interracial marriage (at 44 percent compared to 83 percent). Today, although both populations have become far more open, Whites are still nearly four times more likely than Blacks to voice disapproval for interracial marriage (at 15 percent compared to 4 percent).

No other social opinion in the history of the U.S. Gallop Survey has reversed so completely over time. In just five decades the vast majority of U.S. Americans went from disapproving to approving of interracial marriage. Some of this shift reflects generational change. The disapproval trends shown in figure I.1 would be all but nonexistent if we limited surveys to gathering only the opinions of young adults, given that younger generations tend to voice more progressive views toward race. The only other comparable shift in public opinion relates to gay rights, but that lags far behind a level that might be called near-universal support.

Another barometer for testing attitudes about interracial marriage is the extent to which groups participate in the practice.[10] The intimate act of marriage between two people from different groups provides an indicator of social distance, and social scientists have argued that an increasing
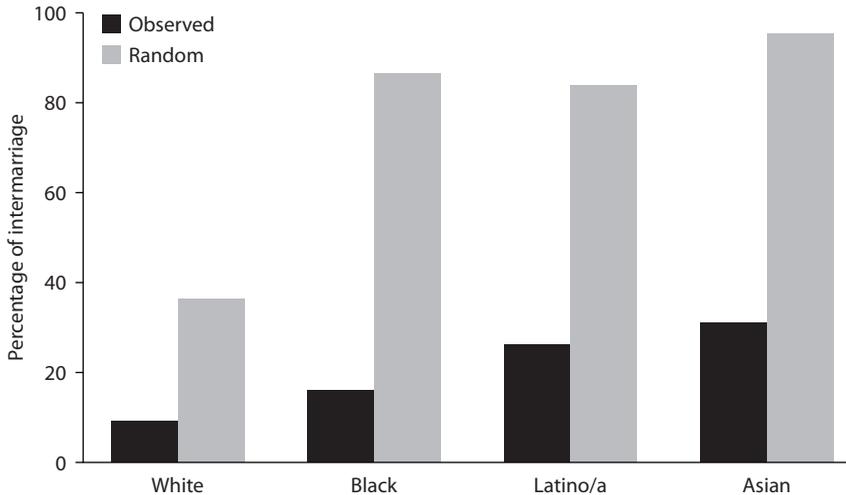
*Figure 1.2. Observed versus Random Interracial and Interethnic Marriage Rates. Source:* Calculated by authors using data from U.S. Census Bureau, *Decennial Census Datasets;* and Taylor, Passel, and Wang, *Marrying Out.*

prevalence of marriage between racial and ethnic groups over time suggests fading prejudice.[11] Moreover, intermarriage itself drives further racial integration, interrupting channels of resource and wealth acquisition that have been historically concentrated among White families.

Despite the sea change in public opinion, actual intermarriage rates are low. Only 6.3 percent of current U.S. marriages are interracial.[12] If we include Latinos/as as a distinct group in these measures, intermarriage rates would still tally up to only 17 percent of current unions.[13] Figure I.2 compares actual intermarriage to the rates we would expect if marriages happened at random across the population. Comparing the observed bars to the random bars, we see that, across every racial and ethnic group, the actual intermarriage rates are three to five times lower than what they could be. These numbers point to a large and ongoing racial divide in marriage partners.

A number of studies have also indicated that cohabiting and dating partnerships are more likely than marriages to be interracial.[14] Indeed, while intermarriage continues to be a meaningful indicator of race relations, changes in U.S. society have made marriage less central than it once

was, particularly for young adults in their early- and midtwenties. The wider acceptance of nonmarital partnership and cohabitation has delayed and even begun to replace marital unions. However, evidence suggests these unions are still significantly separated by racial boundaries. Because of the way race intersects with intimacy in virtually all contexts, cohabitating couples, nonmarital partners, and married couples are all subject to the scrutiny that animates our interest in racial preference and racial hierarchy. Why does our racial "happy talk" seem to stop at the bedroom door?[15]

### PREJUDICE? OR LACK OF EXPOSURE TO OTHERS?

Some people argue that the reason why U.S. interracial unions are rare is not racial bias but a lack of social exposure across racial groups. There is no question that residential segregation continues to be a defining feature of U.S. society, despite legislation from the civil rights era onward.[16] In addition to leading to a pernicious concentration of disadvantage, segregation severely limits cross-racial exposure in everyday life. Beyond the neighborhood, segregation patterns spill out across school districts, churches, and employment settings. As a result, the U.S. population is diverse, but most people are in only infrequent contact with people from other racial backgrounds. The contact that exists is rarely meaningful. This is particularly true of Blacks and Whites, both of whom are more segregated from each other than they are from any other group.[17]

Racial segregation and the consequent lack of exposure is more profound than simple spatial impediment. Lack of familiarity can lead people to develop problematic perceptions of those who are socially distant—in this case, people from racial groups other than their own. Unfamiliarity may exaggerate any difference—from religious traditions to tastes in music, for example—such that it seems like a clear indicator of romantic incompatibility. Worse, separation reinforces stereotypes and fuels racist antagonism.[18] As a result, racial bias and racial segregation are not independent reasons behind the rarity of interracial unions—they are mutually reinforcing causes of ongoing separation.

In the United States explicit racial prejudice among Whites has certainly declined. However, Whites' growing commitment to racial equality

does not mean they don't still harbor implicit biases that favor Whites over other groups.[19] In the long run, U.S. Americans may have become more tolerant of difference in theory, but tolerance—and the rhetoric of tolerance—may have little bearing on choosing intimate partners.

Race also operates intersectionally, or in ways structured by combinations of statuses, like race *and* gender *and* sexuality. This intersectionality is perhaps nowhere as clear as within intermarriage. Black men are twice as likely as Black women to marry outside of their racial group, but it is the reverse among Asian women, who are more than twice as likely as Asian men to marry non-Asians. These trends contradict what some theories would predict, given that Black women and Asian men, on average, have higher levels of education. Thus, the gender differences are unlikely to be explained by individual characteristics. Most likely, as argued by gendered racial formation theory, they reflect pathologized notions of desirability and ideals of masculinity and femininity.[20]

Throughout U.S. history the White racial frame has cast Whiteness as the virtuous baseline—and all other races as inferior deviations.[21] Combined with gender norms, the White frame has produced an intersectional hierarchy of desirability. The most typical of these are images that associate passive femininity with Asians and hypermasculinity with Blacks. Played out intersectionally, this leads to emasculated, negative images of Asian men and compliant, sexually alluring images of Asian women. The same frame produces images of Black men as dangerously virile and Black women as unfeminine and overly dominant.[22] Despite the apparent contrasts in how these associations play out for different groups, make no mistake: they are all forms of dehumanization. The mosaic of controlling images that perpetuate harmful stereotypes may be driving some of the outmarriage trends seen in figure 1.3.[23] They are certainly firmly embedded in the legacies of the United States' racial history and contribute to the intersectional asymmetry of inclusion.

These harmful stereotypes further serve to justify racial inequality because they obscure the structural arrangements that lead to unequal concentrations of power; that is, stereotypes emphasize individual and group flaws as the ultimate explanation for differential opportunities and outcomes. The results of racist structures are, in turn, utilized to justify unequal treatment and otherwise reinforce White advantage.