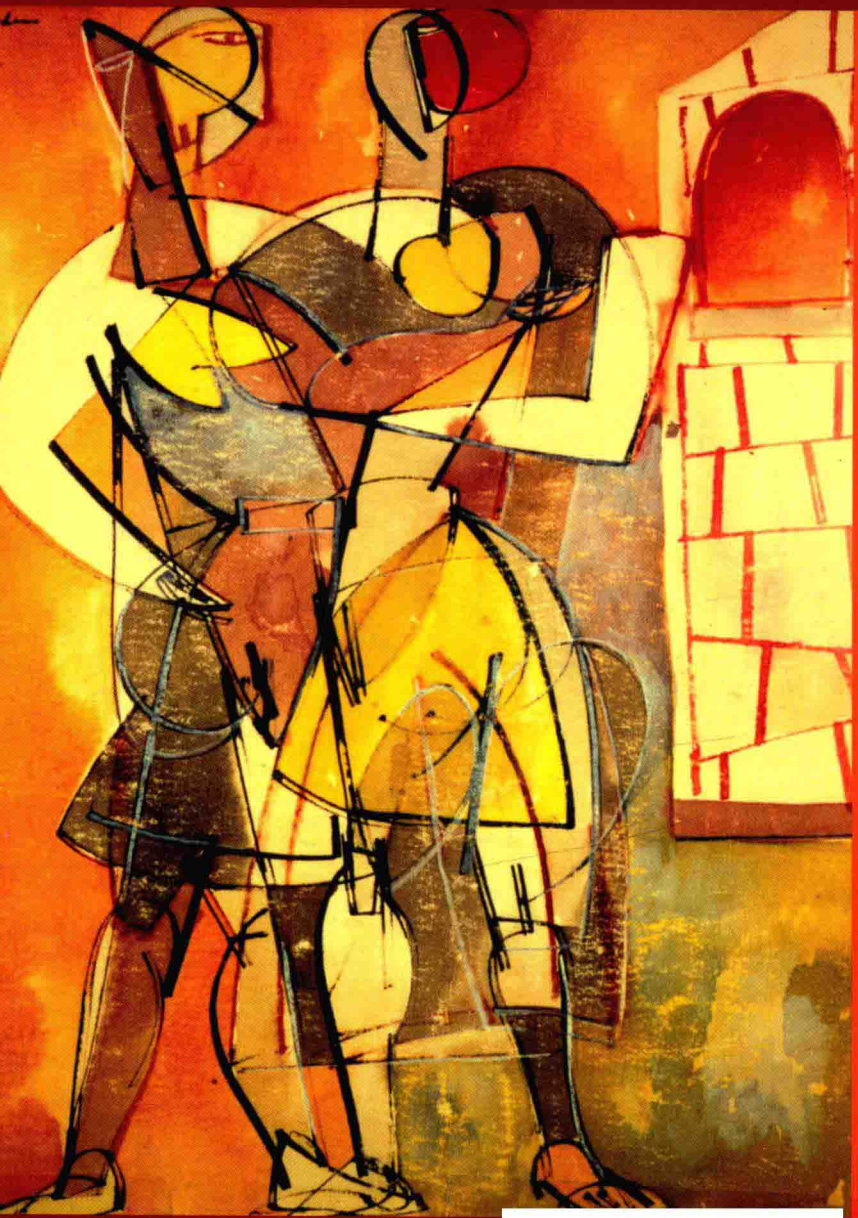
AMY C. STEINBUGLER



BEYOND LOVING

ntimate Racework
n Lesbian, Gay, and Straight
nterracial Relationships

Beyond Loving

Intimate Racework in Lesbian, Gay, and Straight Interracial Relationships

AMY C. STEINBUGLER

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INTRODUCTION

Our upbringings [were] so different. [Kirk] was raised in a family, there was six of them and there was one of me.... There is something about his energy in that upbringing. He tends to be more generous. I tend to be more selfish, in my own perception. He's always thinking about other people's birthdays and anniversaries, and I can barely figure what I'm going to have for dinner the next night.... At times, I'm more superficial and he's less superficial; that's an oppositeness that we have. Although it's funny because I have taken on some of his qualities and he has taken on some of mine.... I like the difference.

WHEN WALTER BELTON-DAVIS DESCRIBES his relationship with his partner, Kirk Belton-Davis, he is thoughtful about their differences.[1] They have different temperaments, ways of expressing themselves, and perceptions of what counts as tidy. Though he is Black and Kirk is White, in the epigraph above, Walter does not describe the racial difference between them as significant. Their racial difference is meaningful to each of them, but they think of it more as an aesthetic variation than a source of conflict. They enjoy being interracial; it brings them pleasure. Sometimes, Kirk, who is forty-four, and Walter, who is forty-six, function like an old married couple. By most counts, they are. They have been together for twenty-four years and are officially registered as domestic partners in the state of New Jersey. Spending time with them reveals their settled intimacy—when they talk together, they play off each other's memories, frequently interrupting with corrections, and anticipating stories' endings.

Race is a part of their relationship, but it is not the only part. They are animal lovers, gardeners, film buffs, and travelers. They squabble about money and whose turn it is to do the laundry. Yet their racial difference has unavoidable consequences. Racial segregation characterizes many of the social spaces they frequent, including some in Philadelphia, which is just fifteen minutes from their suburban New Jersey townhouse. They do not talk about their racial difference in terms of social power, but these two men are unequally positioned in a social context that privileges Whiteness and marginalizes Blackness within other categories, such as gender, sexuality, and social class. As the interracial narratives in this book demonstrate, such differences in power arise in the most ordinary moments of everyday life. Racial difference is also meaningful to this couple and other couples like them because interracial intimacy itself is stigmatized.

Walter and Kirk, like the other partners whose experiences this book explores, are part of a growing trend. The percentage of U.S. couples who are interracial has risen markedly over the last several decades, although such unions are still rare in absolute terms. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, 6.9 percent of heterosexual married couples are interracial.[2] A much smaller percentage of all heterosexual married couples (less than 1 percent) are Black/White.[3] Cohabitants are more likely to be interracial—among all heterosexual unmarried-partner households, 14.2 percent are interracial.[4] The percentage of interracial gay and lesbian unmarried-partner households is 14.1 percent and 11.4 percent, respectively.[5] Yet, as with heterosexual couples, the percentage of lesbian and gay couples who are Black/White is much smaller. Two percent of interracial gay couples and 1.7 percent of lesbian couples are Black/White pairs.[6] But interracial couples—especially heterosexual ones—hold symbolic value greatly disproportionate to their numbers. The increasing frequency of interracial partnerships and the "mixed" children that come from these unions are interpreted by some as proof of a profound shift in U.S. race relations.

Some commentators characterize the first decades of the twenty-first century as the dawn of a "postracial" era in which racial differences will become less and less important until, eventually, Americans will have moved beyond race completely. Those who make this claim marshal evidence from a wide swath of social life, including the tremendous achievements of the civil rights movement, the demise of de jure discrimination, and survey research showing a decline in racial hostility among White Americans, especially in younger generations. These analysts find the increasing numbers of interracial families and multiracial people especially relevant, for they seem to promise to change the face of America

itself.[7] Critics, however, argue that a postracial world is a fantasy—a future that we are never likely to encounter. These voices remind us of the enormous gulfs that still separate racial groups in the United States. Structural inequalities in education, employment, health care, housing, and rates of incarceration persist. Critics also point to the vastly different cultural meanings that groups attach to patterns of racial inequality.[8] From this standpoint, interracial unions and multiracial children are no panacea for enduring problems of stratification.

Debates about the possibility of a postracial society threaten to devolve into a standoff between those who focus on decades of racial progress and those who stress the persistence of inequality. This polarized discussion obscures a more complex reality. Racial dynamics in the United States have shifted in complicated ways, leaving vestiges of old racial systems within contemporary racial formations. Our racial present is a mix of enduring inequalities and new cultural messages. To understand this contemporary reality, we must set aside the simplistic notion of a postracial society and move on to more sophisticated questions: In the first decades of the twenty-first century, how do people experience race in their everyday lives? How do individuals engage one another across racial lines? Can intimate relationships bridge racial boundaries, or do they inevitably reproduce the tensions that characterize broader racial hierarchies?

Beyond Loving addresses these fundamental questions about the contemporary significance of race in the United States by examining the everyday lives of same-sex and heterosexual Black/White interracial couples. It extends the work of researchers who for decades have looked to micro-level interactions for clues about macro-level race relations. Various forms of interracial relationships, such as Asian American/White, Native American/Black, Native American/White, have existed throughout history. Intimacy between Blacks and Whites, however, is a crucial point of inquiry, because this color line has historically been the most rigorously surveilled and restricted.[9] Indeed, it is precisely because of this history of fierce contestation that the rising number of these unions generates both hope and skepticism.

My analysis focuses on what I call "racework": the routine actions and strategies through which individuals maintain close relationships across lines of racial stratification.[10] Interracial partners are not the only people who do racework—interracial friendships and parent-child relationships are also close relationships in which people negotiate racial differences. Yet intimate romantic relationships are a crucial site at which to explore this practice, because these are often the most central and deeply rooted

bonds that people form in their lifetimes. This book explores the practice of racework within public spaces, intimate interactions, and identities. I examine the following four types of racework: navigating racial homogeneity, visibility management, emotional labor, and boundary work. Conceptualizing these social practices as "work" makes interracial intimacy visible as an ongoing process, rather than as a singular accomplishment. This analytic shift also reveals how race "works" in intimate spheres and draws attention to the complexity of interracial interactions in other areas of social life, including schools, neighborhoods, and workplaces.

This book also charts new territory by bringing gay and lesbian interraciality into focus. Whereas research on interracial couples in the United States has traditionally looked almost exclusively at heterosexual couples, I analyze how everyday racial practices are shaped by sexuality and gender. I examine how being lesbian, gay, or heterosexual influences the ways in which partners attach meanings to being an interracial couple, experience racial difference, and engage in racework. This allows me to foreground the experiences of same-sex Black/White partners, a type of interracial relationship that has been almost completely neglected in sociological studies of interracial intimacy.[11]

Highlighting lesbian and gay interracial experiences also creates an opportunity to consider the significance of racial difference outside and apart from the influence of stigmas associated with heterosexual interraciality. Because qualitative scholars of interracial intimacy in the United States have focused almost exclusively on heterosexual couples, their observations typically center on how partners respond to cultural anxieties attached to heterosexual Black/White intimacy.[12] Observing these cultural anxieties has too often kept researchers' gaze trained on social prejudice. Privileging the problem of prejudice obscures other important ways in which racial difference shapes personal relationships. For instance, when two people establish intimate relationships across racial lines, they must negotiate each other's differential access to status and power. Interracial relationships are not miniature models of racial hierarchy in which the person of color is subordinate to the White partner, and yet neither are these relationships raceless spheres in a racialized world. Interracial partners also must navigate racially divided social environments to find spaces where both are comfortable. Researchers who have focused primarily on longstanding prejudice against heterosexual Black/White couples have failed to explore these other formidable challenges. Critically examining the experiences of lesbian and gay partners therefore opens up at least two new vantage points in the study of interracial intimacy. Expanding our

view to include lesbians and gays pushes us to acknowledge other daily challenges to interracial lives in addition to the problems of prejudice. That is, it forces us not only to look at more kinds of interracial partners, but also to look at them differently. Further, by attending to crucial issues of sexuality and gender, we see how race intersects with other dimensions of inequality, including heterosexism and sexism. This broader lens reveals the true complexities of interracial unions.

Love Myths, Assimilation, and the Importance of Seeing Race as Structure

The day-to-day lives of interracial couples involve a myriad of issues besides race. The women and men in this study contended with challenges large and small: adjusting to a new job, managing a long commute, helping a son with grade-school math, planning a wedding, feeding dinner to a two-year-old, trying to get pregnant, finding standing room on the subway, and creating time to be together. So I was not surprised when some interracial partners told me that the racial difference between them was not a major concern.

Yet, as a researcher, I also recognize that our contemporary ideologies about race and romance de-emphasize the significance of race and racism. The practice of avoiding discussions about race or diminishing its importance by insisting that "we are all just people" who share an equal and common humanity reflects what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva calls "abstract liberalism," a key component of colorblind racism.[13] Abstract liberalism enables individuals to de-emphasize their membership in racial groups whose members share a common social location or material interests, and instead to see interracial intimacy as a coincidence of skin color, a partnership between two people who "happen to be" of different races. The popular notion that love and romance exist in an emotional space beyond the realm of rational cognition typically affirms the serendipity of romantic love. In recent decades, sociologists have identified cultural and gendered patterns in how Americans think about romantic love and intimacy.[14] Popular "love myths" characterize love and desire as at once "natural and supernatural," situated within "the mysterious realm of romance, where all that occurs is deemed to stand apart from and often to be arrayed against social convention."[15] Rachel Moran conceptualizes this perspective as one of "romantic individualism," a vantage point from which love can be not only blind, but colorblind as well.[16] This framework

emphasizes that categories like race, ethnicity, class, and religion cannot tell us either how or whom to love.[17] In the popular imagination, love has the potential for bringing about radical social transformation, because it is believed to supersede group differences and render them trivial. These two discourses—abstract liberalism and romantic individualism—share a common thread. From both perspectives, romantic love is a great equalizer that rises above the supposed banalities of color and class.

Some of these popular ideas about love mesh easily with assimilation theory. Classical assimilation theorists considered interracial intimacy a measure of the social distance between racial groups and an important site of structural and cultural assimilation. They expected that only through such cross-cutting unions could individuals from ethnic groups become sufficiently enmeshed in White American communities that they would lose all traces of what made them distinctive.[18] Intermarriage with Whites was interpreted as a clear signal that minority group members had adopted the language and customs of the dominant White population and had been economically and politically absorbed into mainstream society.[19] This theory was modeled on the experiences of European immigrants from countries such as Germany, Ireland, and Italy. It never adequately captured the racialized realities of African Americans, or of Chinese, Japanese, or Filipino immigrants. A trajectory of gradual absorption was not a viable option for groups who were visually coded as indelibly different and inferior.[20] The benign absorption of racial minorities is untenable in the presence of the kind of intensive, systemic racism that exists in the United States.

Despite the discrediting of classical assimilation theories, the idea that the "mixing" of Blacks and Whites will bring the two groups closer together and dissolve racial differences continues to hold great symbolic power. This is true even though the one-drop rule (the racial classification system in which a person with *any* African ancestry is considered "Black") has never blurred, let alone broken, the color line. It has simply positioned children of Black and White parents as Black. Only now, when multiracialism and hybridity have come to be seen as potentially transformative, are Black/White couples cast as part of an intimate "vanguard" who "work on narrowing the divisions between groups in America, one couple at a time."[21] From this perspective, the differences that separate social groups geographically, politically, and culturally are expected to erode and eventually disappear in the context of long-term, stable, romantic relationships.

It is a curious idea that in a world where racial conflicts are widespread, romantic love can be assumed to create an intimate sphere in which racial differences do not matter. Social scientists have long demonstrated that equal

status is not a prerequisite for marriage, nor does marriage itself have an equalizing function.[22] For example, we know that heterosexual marriage does not neutralize status differences between women and men. Some of the same assumptions that have traditionally segregated men and women in particular labor markets also organize the division of housework inside the home.[23] Within most heterosexual marriages, women still perform more housework and have primary responsibility for childcare, whether or not they also hold a full-time job.[24] These and similar findings suggest that social inequalities that exist in our broader society also shape intimate relationships.

My perspective on race is markedly different from popular imaginings of love and romance and from the predictions of classic assimilation models. White supremacy in the United States is not primarily a set of malicious attitudes or misunderstandings. It is a social system. For centuries, Whites have structured social institutions—education, law, housing, criminal justice, employment—to benefit Whites. Racism is therefore not primarily a problem of prejudice, although this may be what is easiest to see. As a system, it involves both institutional inequalities and patterns of ideas—or ideologies—that justify or naturalize these inequalities. Making this distinction is important because how we define racism shapes how we think about interracial intimacy. When social scientists (and others) understand racism entirely as racial *prejudice*, as a collection of resilient, negative generalizations, then intimacy seems to promise a way to neutralize racial differences. Contact theory is based on this very premise: It proposes that anti-Black racism has its basis in ignorant, faulty generalizations and that social intimacy corrects erroneous stereotypes, conferring acceptance and equality.[25] But if we recognize racism as a *social system*, one that shapes not only individual attitudes and perceptions but also how people are materially rewarded or disadvantaged within social institutions, we are left with many more difficult questions. How do White and Black partners maintain intimate relationships when they do not share equal levels of racial power and privilege? Can familiarity, empathy, and intimacy erode racial differences within interracial couples? Do interracial relationships have the potential to change broader dynamics between Whites and Blacks? This study explores these questions by asking *how* people establish and maintain bonds of trust, love, and communication across systems of stratification.

Conceptualizing Racework

The approach I take in this book differs from other research on interracial intimacy. In analyzing interracial narratives, I have tried to understand not

only the social context in which lesbian, gay, and heterosexual interracial partners live their lives, but also how these partners go about sustaining intimacy across systems of stratification (White supremacy, sexism, and heterosexism). The concept of racework, described earlier, helps bring into sharp relief the commonplace practices through which interracial partners deal with being racially different in a society where African Americans and Whites are spatially segregated and persistently unequal. Racework also draws attention to the dynamic nature of intimate relationships and helps us understand the countless ways in which race shapes social interactions. I am particularly concerned with four types of racework that people use to maintain close relationships across racial lines. I categorize these as boundary work, visibility management, emotional labor, and navigating racial homogeneity.

For many partners, the existence of longstanding interracial stigmas makes particular forms of racework necessary. Despite sometimes being heralded as symbols of a more progressive racial future, in everyday life—at work, on city sidewalks, at the mall—interracial partners often face a different perception. Their relationships are viewed as ill-fated, based purely on sexual attraction, or simply immoral. In response, Black and White partners take steps to assert a counter identity for their relationship, one that distances them from these stereotypes. This process of drawing boundaries between themselves and others—to assert who they are and who they are *not*—is a form of work. I identify these social practices as *boundary work.*

The same negative stereotypes that partners actively challenge as they talk about themselves and their relationship also shape their behavior in public spaces. In order to move safely through the streets, neighborhoods, and social spaces in which they live, some interracial partners, especially lesbian and gay partners, take one of two approaches. Some assume a defensive posture, modifying their actions in order to mask their intimacy. Others, conversely, take proactive measures to make their intimacy more visible. Although these may seem to be opposite strategies, both are means of obtaining some control over situations in which being recognized brings potential vulnerability. This form of racework is best characterized as *visibility management.* We can think of visibility management as partners' public strategy for dealing with some of the same prejudices evaded at the level of their identity as a couple through boundary work. Conceptually separating boundary work from visibility management clarifies the extent to which the problems of racism necessitate modification of both identities and public behaviors.

Stigma is not the only manner in which racial difference manifests for interracial couples. Stigmas and stereotypes come from the outside—from strangers, coworkers, neighbors, members of church congregations, family members, and so on. Racial differences are also a reality *inside* the relationship itself. In the United States, along with social class, gender, and sexuality, "membership" in a racial group shapes people's life chances, as well as the vantage point from which they view racial inequality. In the context of an intimate relationship, interracial partners must negotiate their different racial—and sometimes gender—statuses, as well as the particular orientations that arise from these statuses. I identify this form of racework as *emotional labor.*

The final form of racework is *navigating racial homogeneity.* More than two-thirds of the interracial partners in this study live in racially segregated neighborhoods (specifically, in neighborhoods that are at least 70 percent White or 70 percent Black). Living in a place where one's racial group is in the minority did not bother every partner. For many, though, this experience engendered race fatigue—the stress that results from always feeling conspicuous and repeatedly having to consider the racial undercurrents in ordinary social interactions. I call the work of managing this fatigue and feeling of relative isolation *navigating racial homogeneity.*

Lesbians, Gays, and the Experience of Racial Difference within a Heterosexist Social World

Qualitative studies have provided rich details about the contours of everyday interracial life.[26] By privileging the narratives of interracial partners, they illuminate the challenges of establishing relationships and families across racial boundaries. But the vast majority of these studies have taken heterosexual interracial couples as their only subjects.[27] The near-exclusive focus on heterosexual interraciality limits these studies' analytic power in two main ways. First, researchers who fail to examine how heterosexuality itself shapes the experiences of the straight Black/White couples they study overlook the fact that interracial partners have a sexual status, as well as a racial one. This is a significant oversight, given that U.S. society is heteronormative. When heterosexuality is assumed to be the "normal" mode of sexual and social relations, heterosexual persons, relationships, and families are privileged as healthy, legitimate, and natural, whereas those with same-sex desires are often marginalized as deviant, unnatural, or criminal.[28] Historically, heterosexuals have had—and continue to

have—innumerable customary privileges that are amplified or diminished by their race, gender, and social class. Examples of these privileges include having one's sexuality affirmed in most religious traditions, enjoying legal recognition of one's marriage throughout the United States and the world, and knowing that employment benefits (e.g., health and life insurance) will cover one's spouse.[29] Researchers' failure to explore how heterosexuality itself shapes interracial life is akin to studying the history of White labor unions without considering their Whiteness, or analyzing all-male sports teams without examining the production of masculinity. In this way, heterosexuality is further normalized, and these couples—though they have been historically stereotyped as sexual deviants—are not seen as possessing a notable sexual identity, just as Whites are often not seen as possessing a particular racial identity and men are not seen as possessing a particular gender identity.

Studying only straight interracial couples, and not examining how their lives are shaped by their "straightness," has led researchers to misinterpret the experiences of straight couples as representative of all interracial couples, including lesbian and gay ones. Specifically, because it is often true of heterosexual couples, these researchers erroneously assume that racial difference is the "master status" for all interracial partners and that racial difference between intimate Black/White partners is almost always highly visible.

The second main limitation of qualitative research on interracial couples that focuses exclusively on heterosexuals is that it has shaped interraciality into an area of intellectual inquiry where heterosexual assumptions go virtually unchallenged. I include gay and lesbian couples in my study to explore how racial difference is experienced in the context of entrenched and widespread marginalization of lesbian and gay relationships. As I noted above in my discussion of racial stratification, how we conceptualize this marginalization shapes our understanding of gay and lesbian interracial lives. When people assumed to be lesbian or gay are openly harassed—for example, by strangers yelling hurtful words from car windows—or are ostracized by family members who believe their relationships to be immoral or unnatural, we call these actions and attitudes homophobic. Homophobia is defined as an extreme and irrational aversion to homosexuality. Commonly used, the term refers to emotional, angry, or fearful reactions to lesbians and gays, as well as to bisexual and transgendered persons. But if we focus on homophobia as a set of stubborn, negative associations held by certain individuals, we miss the systemic nature of gay and lesbian subjugation and underestimate the scope of the

problem. Homophobic acts are not isolated aberrations from an otherwise egalitarian sexual system. Sexual stratification *is* the system, and its norms are embedded in the structures of our culture and laws. In other words, the lesbian and gay partners in this study are marginalized not only by strangers' overt hostility or family members' hurtful comments, but also by state laws that forbid them to marry or by employment policies that prevent them from sharing health insurance benefits. In this book, I refer to the systemic subjection of lesbian and gays as *heterosexism*, which has been defined as "the pervasive cultural presumption and prescription of heterosexual relationships—and the corresponding silencing and condemnation of homosexual erotic, familial, and communitarian relations."[30] Making clear the extent to which heterosexist assumptions are embedded within social institutions is an important, ongoing project that will enable researchers to see connections between discrimination in marriage and adoption laws, immigration laws, housing and employment policies, and welfare policies.[31]

The Study

At its core, this study is about how people maintain relationships across lines of stratification and how they establish intimacy in the context of inequality. To explore these topics, I used a qualitative approach—one that would allow me to understand how interracial partners interact with their social worlds and how they interact with each other. I wanted to understand how people interpreted the racial difference between themselves and their partner. What does it mean? Under what circumstances does it become important? When is it *not* important? How do sexuality and gender shape these experiences? To investigate these and related questions, I conducted interviews and gathered accounts of what it means to be interracial in everyday life.

This book is based on the narratives of eighty-two interracial partners, as well as ethnographic observations conducted among a smaller subset of this group. (Methodological details are provided in appendix A, and key characteristics of the sample are provided in appendix B.) Because it was important to talk with the members of each couple separately, the eighty-two interviews represent both partners of forty couples, plus two additional interviews with Black women whose White husbands were unavailable. Of the forty couples, ten are lesbian, ten are gay, ten are heterosexual couples in which the woman is Black and the man is White, and