TRIPPING on the COLOR LINE

Black-White

Multiracial Families

in a Racially

Divided World

HEATHER M. DALMAGE

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Tripping on the Color Line

To my parents, Dorothea L. Trepanier and Lionel G. Trepanier

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Introduction

Thinking

about the

Color Line

About mid-semester during one of the introduction to sociology courses I teach, two of my cousins decided to sit in on the class. This was my first semester teaching in Chicago, and they wanted to see their "cuz" in action. At the next class meeting the students and I were sitting in a circle discussing some sociological point when the question came up: "Professor, what are you? I was talking to some people about this class, and they asked me what you are, you know, racially. I told them I wasn't sure." Another student joined in: "Yeah, what are you?"

The question is loaded. More than five hundred years' worth of socially, politically, economically, and culturally created racial categories rest in the phrase "what are you." People seeing me in the street would have little doubt that I was a white woman. Yet the cousins who sat in on my class are mixed Korean and Filipino, my aunt is Filipino, my uncle is Korean, my nieces are mixed Indonesian and white, my in-laws are Jamaican, my husband is black. What does

that make me? The quick answer is "a white woman from a multiracial family." Nevertheless, the quick answer cannot address more than five hundred years of racial baggage. In a sociology course we can delve into some of this baggage and begin to address race on a more complex level. In day-to-day living, however, race is often used as a clear-cut, unambiguous way of categorizing human beings. Those of us who do not come from or live in single-race families must daily negotiate a racialized and racist system that demands we fit ourselves into prescribed categories.

When I decided to begin the research for this book, I knew few people in my shoes. My husband (a black man) and I (a white woman) had been together for nearly a decade. I had heard the question "What about the children?" so many times that I finally decided to explore the question myself. I began speaking with multiracial adults about their lives. As I listened to and talked with these individuals, I began to recognize some similarities between their experiences as multiracial people and my own as an interracially married white woman. At the same time I was participating in an adoption reading group and spending a great deal of time researching, discussing, and writing about families created through transracial adoption. It was becoming clear that multiracial people, transracially adopted people, and all members of first-generation multiracial families share many experiences in a racially unjust and segregated society. It further became evident that family has been a primary means through which a racially divided and racist society has been maintained

Over the past decade, perhaps no other social institution has received as much public attention as the family. Politicians like to sweep social problems into a neat pile and dump them into the family basket. No problem is too great or small to blame on the family: overweight children, poor grades, improper nutrition, juvenile delinquency, unemployment, drug abuse, illiteracy, violence, moral decay, and the nation's inability to compete in a global economy. The underlying belief is that good families are the key to a good society. Ignored in all the political (and religious) rhetoric about the need for good families is the historical construction of family in the United States.

In traditional thinking and law, a good family is Christian, white, and middle class with a male patriarch, a chaste and virtuous housewife, and obedient children. These ideologies and laws have existed side by side with laws denying African Americans (and others) the rights of marriage and family. In fact, masters often used emotional ties between slaves as a form of coercion. If a slave did not submit to a master's wishes, the master would threaten to sell, rape, or beat another slave; and children were commonly sold away from their mothers.

When slavery was abolished, African Americans gained the legal right to marry without a master's permission. Unfortunately, for many blacks emancipation meant nothing more than sharecropping. Denied jobs in factories and other arenas, they were often forced to work for a landowner who wielded a great deal of power over black families. For instance, even in prosperity, a landowner would not allow a mother to stay in the home and fulfill the role of good woman but forced her and her children to work in the fields. Outside the rural south, black men were systematically denied access to well-paying jobs and fair wages. Thus, most black women were forced to enter the labor market to survive.

All the while, industrialization was creating a framework for a white middle class in which women were defined as good so long as they stayed at home and made the family the center of their existence. Men were defined as good so long

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as they provided economically for their families. These white, middle-class, nuclear families were given ideological, political, economic, and social support and held up as models of virtue and perfection. In circular fashion, nuclear families were used as the justification for the privileges granted to whites and for the hostility and terror directed toward blacks (and some working-class whites). Denied economic and political resources, black families were treated like the cancer eating away at the backbone of good society.

How do any of us know what to call ourselves racially? Many people will say, "I am what my parents are and what their parents were before them and so on." In short, a popular ideology is that we know our race by our family tree. Of course, this family tree does not grow in thin air. It grows in a society that defines race in particular ways. For many years, the concept of family was legally used to maintain white supremacy by drawing a strict line between white families and all other families. In Race and Mixed Race. Naomi Zack argues that "the concept of race has to do with white families—more precisely, with how white family is conceptualized."2 The traditionally enforced ideology is that a white person is pure so long as he or she has no known relatives or ancestors of color. The flip side is that having one known black ancestor makes you black.3 The two definitions seem to account for everyone. You are white or not, black or not; there is no in between. Antimiscegenation laws (those banning marriage between whites and blacks) were set up to maintain the myth of white racial purity and superiority. While laws banning interracial marriage varied from state to state, interracial marriage has been illegal for a good part of our history. Not until 1967, buttressed by the strength of the civil rights movement, did the U.S. Supreme Court strike down antimiscegenation laws as unconstitutional.4

In light of the history of race and family, blacks and

whites respond very differently to contemporary discussions of multiracialism in the United States. Unlike many whites, most black Americans are aware of the history of the one-drop rule and the myth of white purity. Thus, blacks generally respond more guardedly to claims of multiracialism. For instance, when I talk about my research with black friends and colleagues, many tell me: "All African Americans are multiracial. Why do you want to create and give meaning to a separate category?" And, "I can trace my ancestry. I know which great-grandmothers were raped by white men, and I know who those white men were. But I'm still black." And, "Most African Americans are multiracial, but it is not something we like to talk about or want to celebrate. For us it is a painful history of rape, rejection, and exploitation."

Just the other day I was talking with a colleague who asked, "Do you believe there is a difference between being multiracial and being black?" I said yes.

"But," he contested, "black families and black people are multiracial, so how can you make such a distinction?"

I gave him my standard response: "Most multiracial families today are not created through rape and exploitation. Instead, we come together out of mutual respect, love, and admiration. We choose to be together, and some make great sacrifices to be together. Because of who we are in relation to each other racially, we have to fight to be a family. Larger rules of race work to divide us. Besides, our day-to-day experiences are different from the experiences of people who come from families that define themselves monoracially."

He replied, "I still think y'all just want to separate yourselves from black folks. . . . You want to say you're better than blacks."

I understood my colleague's argument. According to the traditional definition of white family, multiracial families and people are not considered white. So why are we trying to muddy the waters and claim that our experiences are different? Should we stake a claim on the side of justice and define ourselves as black families?

If the story ended there, life for multiracial family members would not be much different from the lives of families who consider themselves black. But the story does continue. Black Americans have not passively received the abuses of white supremacy. Instead, they have struggled to unify themselves and fight the injustices of a racist society. By unifying, they have drawn boundaries. A black professor in a local university explained to me one day: "See, the black community wants your husband and your children. We don't have any use for you." In short, the one-drop rule is a downward principle; it does not move upward or across. A white parent or partner is not considered black by most in the black community because he or she has no ancestral claim to blackness. That person can walk away at any time. Yet many whites see the white partner or parent, especially if she is a white women, as no longer white. At the same time, African Americans may view the entire multiracial family with suspicion, even disdain. By disregarding the rules of race and claiming respect for our multiracial families, we are perceived as race traitors and wishy-washy crossovers.

Antimiscegenation laws were struck down in 1967, yet multiracial families still face a great deal of discrimination in society. In 1984 a Florida court took child custody away from a white mother because her second marriage was interracial. The child's biological father (a white man), who was upset about the interracial marriage, sued for custody and won. In the *Michigan Law Review*, Kim Forde-Mazrui notes: "The court relied exclusively on the interracial marriage, which, the court concluded, would subject the child to racial hostility." More recently, a white principal in Widowee,

Alabama, caught the nation's attention when he told students during an assembly that he was going to ban interracial couples from attending a school dance. When a multiracial student asked who she could go to the dance with, he replied that she was a "mistake." On New York's Long Island, a white mother with multiracial children came home to find her house spray-painted with racial slurs. In early 2000, Bob Jones University made the headlines because of its ban on interracial dating.

The percentage of interracial marriages, particularly between blacks and whites, remains low. Fewer than 1 percent of whites and 3 percent of blacks are in black-white marriages. Despite their small (albeit growing) numbers, however, black-white multiracial families receive more attention than do other multiracial families. The fact that black-white families receive disproportionate attention speaks to the seemingly immutable connection between the one-drop rule, the myth of white racial purity, and the construction of race and family in the United States.

Although many multiracial and multiethnic families come from backgrounds other than black and white, I am focusing on black-white family members for two reasons. First, blacks form the only group that has been held to the one-drop standard, and whites form the only group for which purity is believed to be the admission ticket. Second, black-white multiracial families have a unique history in the United States because of the legacy of slavery, and black-white familial relations (or the regulation of such relations) have been inextricably linked to white supremacist and patriarchal power. Thus, black-white families can serve as a lens through which to explore the implications of a growing multiracial population in a race-conscious and racist society.

In 1995 I began interviewing members of multiracial families in the Chicago and New York City areas. During the next

year I interviewed forty-seven people and accumulated more than 150 hours of recorded interviews. I participated in one multiracial organization and sat on the board of directors of another. With my micro-recorder in hand, I met people in their homes, my home, their workplaces, local diners, and parks. I gained much insight because of their openness and willingness to share the details of their lives. Some of these people have become friends and collaborators. The stories I relate in this book, including my own, come from people who live in or have grown up in black-white multiracial families. We come from all walks of life. Some have been adopted into multiracial families, some are interracially married, some are parents of multiracial children, and others have parents of different races. We differ along lines of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, culture, religion, family structure, geographical location, education, and political perspective. In fact, our differences are so great that it is sad to learn how similar our experiences are. These similarities highlight the continued centrality of race in the United States and the ways in which the concept of family has been used to maintain a racially divided and racist society. Throughout this book, I incorporate the stories and ideas shared by the people I interviewed. Through the interviews I explore how race, created through human interaction, permeates every aspect of life from individual thoughts, identities, and desires to community building, social institutions, and policies. At times the interviews are used to exemplify a point. At other times they provide an insight into racial thinking and dynamics that require further analysis. Among the experiences of others, I incorporate my own experiences as a white, interracially married mother. I agree with Abby Ferber's suggestion that "attempts to ignore our own role in the social construction of race reproduce race as a natural and given category of identity."6 My writings, my attempts to influence race debates.

come from a particular set of experiences and racial understandings of the world.

The Color Line Defined

In *The Souls of Black Folks*, W.E.B. Du Bois predicted that the color line would be the problem of the twentieth century. Nearly a hundred years later, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the color line remains a pressing social and personal issue. While ultimately about power, identity, and community, the color line is a difficult concept to define. The way in which the line is drawn reflects the racial picture being created.

Historically, several prominent conceptions of race have been created. Racial essentialists locate race within the human body. Social constructionists understand race as a significant and central social phenomenon that is given meaning through human thought and interaction. Color-blind advocates draw on essentialism or social constructionism (or both) to deny or downplay the significance of race.

The Essentialist Color Line

Racial essentialism is the belief that humans can be grouped together based on some shared and static quality. It is grounded in the belief that racial groups are reflections of genetic codes rather than social creations and hinges on two primary ideas: first, that our racial designation is determined by DNA; second, that the DNA that codes for physical features such as skin color can indicate much more about who a person really is. Racial essentialists cite "obvious" differences in physical features and then link physical appearance to differences in blood pressure or predisposition to particular diseases (such as sickle-cell anemia) as well as differences in musical tastes, athletic ability, and speech pat-