

reading 32

Visibility as Privilege and Danger: Heterosexual and Same-Sex Interracial Intimacy

Amy C. Steinbugler

Introduction

In "Thinking Sex," a pivotal essay from the 1984 volume, *Pleasure and Danger*, Gayle Rubin argues that sexuality is organized into systems of power that reward some individuals and activities while suppressing others. Describing this "sex hierarchy" as privileging particular types of sexual behavior and corresponding lifestyles, Rubin differentiates "good, normal, natural" sexuality which is heterosexual, monogamous, procreative, same-generation, vanilla, in private, and so on, from "bad, abnormal, damned" sexuality that includes homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, casual, cross-generational or sadomasochistic sex. Rubin (1984) argues that those who practice "good sexuality" are rewarded with respectability, legality and mobility while those who practice "abnormal sexuality" suffer disreputability, criminality and restricted mobility. Yet Rubin omits a dimension which in the United States has long structured perceptions of sexual conduct—interracial sexuality. Interracial sexual relations, especially between African-Americans and Whites, have been restricted and criminalized in the United States, while monoracial . . . heterosexuality is legally, politically and socially sanctioned.¹ . . .

[N]ot only [is] Rubin's omission . . . significant, but . . . her failure to include race as central to her theoretical frame has profound implications for the

way we conceptualize sexuality. Ignoring racial difference in intimate relations, Rubin neglects the fundamental manner in which racial hierarchies have structured and regulated sexual behaviors and identities.² . . .

While it is notable that in 1984 Rubin overlooked interraciality in theorizing sexual hierarchy, more striking perhaps is that 20 years later a systematic empirical analysis of interracial sexuality has not been undertaken. Intersections of race and sexuality have been meticulously theorized . . . and interraciality has been examined from postcolonial and historical perspectives . . . yet sexuality scholars have not produced sustained empirical research examining heterosexual and queer interraciality.³ . . .

In the United States the racial-sexual boundaries that have historically been most strictly and violently upheld are those between African-Americans and Whites. During 300 years of chattel slavery a pernicious double standard existed regarding interracial sexual relations. Slave owners, by virtue of their racial, political and economic power were able to take sexual license with enslaved women, and cloak these violations in silence and denial (Davis, 1983; James, 1996; Collins, 2000). To evade culpability for this abuse, Whites constructed African-American women as overly sensual, lustful and rapacious, possessing such excessive sexuality that even the most strong-willed, reasonable White man eventually succumbed. In contrast, Black men might be murdered and castrated for even the slightest suspicion of intimacy with a White woman. The myth of the Black rapist was used to justify the lynching of thousands of Black men in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Wells, 1997 [1892]). . . .

From "Visibility as Privilege and Danger: Heterosexual and Same-Sex Interracial Intimacy in the 21st Century" by Amy C. Steinbugler, *Sexualities*, 8(4), 425–443. Copyright © 2005 by Sage Publications. Reprinted by permission of Sage.

Visibility as a Form of Heterosexual Privilege

Within a heterosexual paradigm, presumptions of heterosexuality infuse the social world. Heterosexuality prescribes what is proper intimacy (Rich, 1980), who is a proper citizen (Evans, 1993; Richardson, 2000), and what is a proper family (Donovan et al., 1999; Weeks et al., 2001). . . . Paradoxically, the naturalization of heterosexuality ensures its simultaneous visibility and invisibility in social identities and social spaces—heterosexuality is "invisibly visible" (Brickell, 2000). As a normative category, heterosexuality is invisible as such, yet heterosexual intimacy is overtly visible in social spaces. . . .

Cohen argues that multiple identities—including race, gender and class—limit the entitlement and status individuals receive from "obeying a heterosexual imperative" (1997: 442). Carbado (2000: 117) suggests a list of 44 heterosexual privileges⁴ acknowledging the safety of being visibly heterosexual in public spaces in a US context. He asserts that an important element of heterosexual privilege is that a man and a woman can comfortably express affection in any social setting, even a gay one, without wondering whether kissing or holding hands will render them vulnerable to violence. Carbado highlights the ease through which heterosexual couples may navigate social spaces, assuming that they will be recognized as a couple and that no violence will stem from this recognition. His list demonstrates that visibility may be one of the most fundamental heterosexual privileges. Yet for Carbado the hypothetical heterosexual couple, while not necessarily White, is implicitly monoracial. Research suggests that Carbado's list of privileges may not hold true for heterosexual interracial couples (Rosenblatt et al., 1995; Dalmage, 2000; Childs, 2001; Hildebrandt, 2002).

Same-Sex Intimacy: "Up from Invisibility"?

While research on heterosexuality casts visibility as an unspoken privilege, sexuality scholars proclaim

a rise in visibility among gays and lesbians in the United States (Dow, 2001; Battles and Hilton-Morrow, 2002; Shugart, 2003). . . . [S]cholars of media and culture turn a critical eye to the influx of gays and lesbians into mainstream culture, announcing an "era of visibility" (Walters, 2001: xvi). Elements of this "explosion of gay visibility" include news coverage of gay-related issues, gay sport stars and rockstars, gay TV characters, gay cartoon characters, gay entrepreneurs, gay days at theme parks, a gay MasterCard and even a gay beer, Triangle Brew (Walters, 2001). Yet media representations of gays and lesbians continue to reflect a particular gay demographic—mostly White, mostly male, mostly middle, upper-middle class (Gross, 2001: 4), and implicitly monoracial.

Simultaneously, media scholars admit a significant disjunction between lived experiences and cultural representation. . . . Because heterosexuals have been established as a *socially* inscribed class and gays and lesbians as a *sexually* inscribed class, queer sexuality is relegated to private realms and out of the public eye (Richardson, 1996).⁵ "When gay people engage in behaviors allowed for heterosexuals (such as holding hands and kissing), they make public what society has prescribed should be private. They are accused of flaunting their sexuality and thereby are perceived as deserving or even asking for retribution, harassment or assault" (Herek, 1992: 95). . . .

[Scholars] argue that for "non-heterosexuals," "the simple pleasures of everyday life" are constrained by knowledge of a persistent stigma about non-heterosexuality (Weeks et al., 2001: 184). The result is a constant need to "self-monitor," continually assessing the amount of risk they will take to keep safe on the streets and in their homes (2001). Using interview data from the same project, Donovan et al. suggest that even as non-heterosexuals live in constant vigilance, they also experience a lack of recognition and validation for their relationships. These respondents express a desire for fuller citizenship as a way of protecting, affirming and removing the stigma from their lives (1999: 699). Indeed, risks associated with visibility and frustrations associated with invisibility are

simultaneous experiences in the lives of same-sex couples. . . .

Interracial Intimacy:

In/visibility and Racial Difference

. . . When examining the relationship between visibility and sexuality, . . . scholars have continued to assume sexual relationships are monoracial. The problems with such an assumption are threefold. First, presuming monoraciality ignores the rapidly increasing number of interracial relationships in the United States.⁶ Second, analyzing interracial sexual relationships allows us to see how racial difference may disrupt heterosexual privileges and further marginalize lesbians and gay men. Lastly, the violent history associated with interracial sexuality in the United States may create a difficult social environment that both heterosexual and same-sex interracial couples must navigate.

Given that the United States has been persistently haunted by the specter of interracial sexuality, little is known about how these couples experience visibility or invisibility in public spaces. Assumptions of monoraciality dominate literature on heterosexuality while relationships between White and Black men or White and Black women remain desperately undertheorized. How does this history of violence surrounding interracial heterosexuality in the US mediate the everyday visibility of interracial couples? How do queer interracial couples navigate social spaces dominated by presumptions of heterosexuality and monoraciality? . . .

Research Methodology

Data for this analysis comes from 16 interviews conducted with a nonrandom sample of eight Black/White interracial couples in Philadelphia and New York City in 2004. . . . [F]our were heterosexual and four were same-sex couples. Of the heterosexual couples, two involved a Black man and a White woman and two involved a Black woman and a White man. Of the same-sex couples, two couples were gay and two were lesbian. This research focuses only on Black/White couples. . . .

Heterosexual Interraciality:

Seen and Unseen

Moments of Dislocation

A recurring experience in the narratives of interracial couples is their *visual dislocation* in public settings, e.g. while waiting in line at a food counter or a restaurant. If they are not holding hands or being physically affectionate, in a crowd of people they are assumed by the quick glances of strangers to be unrelated. Almost every couple I spoke to—regardless of sexuality—had one of these stories to tell. The significance of these instances to the couples themselves varied from indifference to annoyance and anger. For instance, Vera, a 33 year-old White woman, who has a 12-year-old White daughter, Becky, from a previous marriage and a 6-month-old daughter, Kaya, with her Black husband, Calvin, relays her frustration at not being recognized as a family.

We'll be next to each other [in line] and the clerk will say, "Can I help you, sir?" or something like that. Just assuming we are not together, even though we all maybe standing there together and it may be all four of us standing there together. The people just assume that you're not with this person because he is not White.

On some occasions, these disconnections provoked ire. Warren, a 28-year-old White man, voiced his resentment at the persistent inability of strangers to see himself and his Black wife Nakia as together, while allowing that he may possess heightened sensitivity.

Warren For instance [we're] waiting in line for a deli and she pays and they're like, "Can I help you?" I'm like, "I'm with her. Don't you get that?" Why would I stand so close to her? People look at you, like you're not [together]. It happens all the time.

ACS How do you feel when that happens?

Warren Well it pisses me off. I mean small things . . . a small thing like that pisses me off. I don't understand the ignorance, but maybe I would react the same way. Because you never know who is with who or what. So maybe I'm the one that is oversensitive.

In a society in which both living and social spaces are racially segregated⁷ the infrequency of interracial intimacy may render these strangers' oversights understandable or seemingly unremarkable. Persons in monoracial relationships may sometimes experience such misunderstandings. Yet the persistent and cumulative nature of these small events in the everyday lives of interracial couples is meaningful to these respondents. While these instances may not convey outright hostility or aggression, . . . they do affirm the marginal or outsider status of interracial intimacy, underscoring the normative status of monoracial intimacy and the invisibility of closeness across racial lines.

Moments of Visibility

Though heterosexual interracial couples feel invisible in particular situations, in others they endure prolonged stares or comments. The sexual-racial configuration of the couple—a White woman with a Black man versus a Black woman with a White man—had a lot to do with when and how they felt conspicuous in public settings. When I asked Calvin, a 30-year-old Black man married to Vera, a White woman, whether they get noticed as an interracial couple, he dryly explains strangers' stares.

I think they are more star-stuck because I am an incredibly handsome man and my wife is remarkably beautiful. That's the way I look at things. You have to kind of hypnotize yourself to believe why those people are staring at you.

Kalvin's reference to hypnosis reflects the constancy of the looks and stares he and Vera receive when they are out to eat, at the mall, or at a baseball game. I ask him *who* tends to stare.

I think, in my opinion the Black race is more vocal. The Black women are upset because this White woman came and took one of their men, one of their good brothers . . . You'll see the dirty looks from some of the Black women, who are sitting in a group of Black women (*mimics their sighs*). You'll see them stare you up and down, and I'll grab my wife and kiss her or something. I'll give them a show if they want. It doesn't matter to me.

Kalvin's comments reveal that he is quite used to the disapproval he encounters from Black women and is

not threatened by it. Similarly, Scott, a 32-year-old Black man, interprets the reactions he gets from Black women as "disapproval" or "dismissal," though he attempts to shrug them off. His White partner, Tamara, who is 30, has a more difficult time with the hostility she perceives.

I feel very threatened by Black women because I feel like they're looking at me like I've taken one of their men.

As Tamara continues, it appears that she does not fear physical retaliation but feels both concerned and frustrated by the sexual and racial politics that surround her relationship with Scott.

In addition to the displeasure they saw in the faces and comments of Black women, heterosexual couples consisting of a Black man and a White woman experienced more serious and physically aggressive threats from White men, and in one instance, a White woman. Both couples had experienced verbal confrontations involving racial slurs and threats of violence. Scott described an experience he had while dating a White woman in Greece three years before he met Tamara. While walking with his then-girlfriend through the crowded streets of a little town at 9 o'clock on a warm night in August, he was attacked by five "neo-Nazi skinheads." The attackers chased him through the streets and eventually beat him nearly to death with railroad-ties. Though Scott prides himself on not living in fear of another attack, he remains vigilant and hyperaware in public settings. Incidents of physical violence were uncommon among my respondents, but most couples had a few frightening stories they carried with them.

Black women in relationships with White men received a different manner of attention and their experiences of visual dislocation appeared more typical. Moments of heightened visibility were less common, but they did occur. Warren, a 28-year-old White man, explains that when he is out with his wife, Nakia, a 29-year-old Black woman, the most common reaction they get is from Black men.

Warren [We had] problems as an interracial couple . . .

We would get a lot of troubled comments from a lot of Black men.

ACS What would they be likely to say?

Warren They'd be like, "Whoa, sister what are you doing with this guy?" I mean it was never—on occasion once or twice was it Black women. At least not outspoken it wasn't White people. The most outspoken was Black men who did not like the fact that you could—a White man could have one of their Black sisters. They definitely did not like that. It wouldn't be a problem for a Black man, if a brother has a White woman. That's cool. The other way it doesn't work.

Warren was able to recall a few instances where he and Nakia had been antagonized by Black men, but those altercations never resulted in physical threats. . . .

[T]he experiences of these interracial couples suggests a more nuanced connection between race, sexuality and visibility. Interraciality serves to disrupt the workings of heterosexual privilege in two ways. First, couples report numerous experiences of visual dislocation, moments where they are rendered visibly separate from each other by strangers who do not recognize interracial intimacy. Second, when their intimacy is acknowledged by others—often precipitated by physical displays of affection—it is sometimes met with hostility or aggression. In addition, the extent to which these couples are "seen" differently by Blacks and Whites illustrates the relevance of race to the operation of heterosexual visibility.

Same-Sex Partners: Invisible Intimacy?

Like the heterosexuals I spoke to, gay and lesbian couples also discussed being in line together in a deli or grocery store and being approached for assistance separately by the counter clerk or cashier. Yet these couples also experienced a much deeper, more acute sense of visual dislocation in public places.

Both gay and lesbian couples explain their own assumption unless they are holding hands or being physically demonstrative, strangers often will not recognize their partnership. When I asked Thad, a 46-year-old White man, whose Black partner of seven years is 28, whether he thinks people recognize him and Lucas as a couple, he pauses and takes a deep breath. "You know, I don't really think about that a

lot. But if I do think about it, I would assume, no. I would think that they wouldn't. I would think they would look at us and go 'What are those guys doing together?'" Leslie, a 37-year-old White woman who's been with her Black partner, Sylvia, for seven years explains what she sees as people's inability to recognize interracial intimacy in almost any form.

I think, it's really sad, but I think that people think it's so unusual for people of different races to have any kind of intimate relationship, even a friendship, that people don't consider it, you know. And like that's why depending on where we are I feel like Sylvia's work-friend, that people are like, "Oh, who's this random White woman that's with you?" Like it doesn't occur to people that we could be close—even if we weren't lovers—that we could be important to each other in that way that you might want to say hello to both of us.

For Leslie this lack of recognition is most troubling when it comes from men who approach Sylvia when the two of them are walking on the street.

A lot of times I feel invisible and particularly with men who will walk—if we're together—they'll walk straight up to her on the street and start talking to her without even making any eye contact or looking at me in any way. So I feel like when men pick her out like I'm invisible completely. Which is really gross, it's a gross feeling.

Francine, a 23-year-old Black woman, also experiences forward gestures by men when she's with her 22-year-old White partner, Kap. But unlike the story Leslie related, these advances are made while Francine and Kap are walking down a street holding hands.

Kap and I were talking about this last night, or a couple nights ago, about why we think people don't recognize us as a couple . . . or why men hit on me when she's with me. And so she was like, "You know what? They wouldn't do that if I were a Black man." And I was like "You're right . . . and if you were a Black dyke, they would probably still hit on me, but not as much." But because of who she is they do hit on me . . . I'm talking about Black men hitting on me, because that's usually who hits on me. Um, so, I guess that's like the way that they interact with us differently because we're interracial—the fact that they don't read us as a couple or that they don't respect that even if they do read us as a couple.

Francine's continual experience of being approached by men in front of her White female partner exemplifies the ways that queer interracial relationships become invisible in certain public spaces. Her assertion that men would not approach her if Kap were a Black man reflects her sense that monoracial heterosexuality is seen as legitimate. Her suggestion that if Kap were a Black lesbian, she might still be "hit on," but "not as much" shows that even when queer intimacy is acknowledged, it is often disrespected.

Sylvia, a Black lesbian, reports that this disrespect sometimes comes in the form of insults hurled by passers by. Describing an experience she and her White partner Leslie had in their old New York neighborhood that was both racially mixed and had a sizable lesbian population, she explains

There was one night we were going out and we were holding hands, two blocks from our house maybe . . . and this family—what looked like a family a woman and maybe three or four kids, who'd I say were all under the age of ten, Black family, I don't know where they were from—they were coming towards us and as they passed us one of the boys in the back screamed out "Dyke!" . . . And the mother's just walking and like keeps [walking] her family around the block.

In sum, lesbian and gay interracial couples in this study possess a much stronger sense than heterosexual respondents that their relationship is "invisible" to others in non-queer spaces. These couples violate both US conventions of monoraciality and of heterosexuality and many Americans are not conditioned to recognize romantic intimacy outside of these conventions. Yet when their connection is recognized, it comes with the risk of verbal abuse. . . .

Managing Visibility

For both the heterosexual and same-sex interracial couples I interviewed, tensions surround visibility. Feeling as if they are visually dissociated from each other in public places can be a taxing and tedious experience. Yet for many there is danger in being perceived as sexual partners. Apparent from respondents' narratives is that couples anticipate hostile reactions in particular public contexts, and

often self-police or regulate their behavior so as not to draw unwelcome attention.

Almost every gay or lesbian respondent expressed feelings of cautious restraint in spaces they did not perceive to be queer or accepting of non-heterosexual identities.

Many relayed an increased sense of comfort and safety, and a greater inclination to be physically affectionate in queer spaces, whether it be a bar or club, or a gay area or neighborhood. . . .

We can consider the constant self-awareness and self-regulation in which most queer interracial couples, and some heterosexual couples engage as a process of "working" one's identity (Carbado and Gulati, 2000). This work takes the form of deciding when it is safe to show physical affection and what forms of affection will be permissible. Interracial couples often do significant amounts of identity work as proactive defense.

Importantly, this self-monitoring suggests visibility and invisibility are not states of being but ongoing processes in which queer interracial couples often (and heterosexual interracial couples sometimes) engage. . . . While—depending upon the skin tone and appearance of each partner—their racial difference may be apparent, without physical contact like hand-holding or hugging their sexual intimacy may be invisible. Johnson has argued that in public same-sex couples are often expected to "pass" as heterosexual friends instead of same-sex lovers, "a performance of heterosexuality that is particularly oppressive for gays and lesbians since it involves self-policing and self-regulating the most 'innocent' forms of sexual affection" ([Lassey and Tharinger,] 2002: 328). . . . Because many queer interracial couples are unable to perform monoraciality in public spaces, there may be even greater pressure to pass as heterosexual friends. To simultaneously transgress norms of heterosexuality and monoraciality is to violate the basic tenets of the US heterosexual paradigm.

Becoming and Unbecoming Interracial: The Social Geography of Visibility

Across categories of sexuality, gender and race, respondents emphasized the importance of locality—

street block, neighborhood, borough, city, geographic region or even nation—in their perceptions of visibility and recognition. When I ask Warren, a 28-year-old White man, about his experiences with his Black wife Nakia in New York City, his response reflects an attunement to the social landscapes of individual neighborhoods.⁸

Yeah I think 80% of the city we feel comfortable in, especially Manhattan, even all the way to Washington Heights, which is Harlem. There are certain parts where you might feel a bit more uncomfortable. I think a place like this is just perfect . . . It's kind of what you would look for because people are nice, people are open. You're just a regular old couple, there is no interracial in the couple, you're just a couple and people look at you like that. It's not like, 'Oh they're different. That's interesting.' . . . What I'm saying is that you just kind of blend in and you're just a couple. I think maybe if we go to Harlem and go to 105th [street] and walk around hand in hand, we're not just a couple; we're suddenly becoming an interracial couple. We can go to certain parts in Brooklyn that are either predominately White or Jewish Orthodox, or predominately Black you suddenly become this interracial couple again. It's because the environment changes, not because you change.

. . . [H]is own neighborhood . . . includes enough other interracial couples that he does not feel particularly conspicuous walking hand in hand with Nakia. In other neighborhoods, however, that are predominantly Black or predominantly White, they "become" an interracial couple. Thus his sense of his own visibility as part of an interracial couple is intricately tied to the social geography of his city.

While Warren describes the social terrain of a single metropolitan area, Mabel, a 43-year-old Black woman, who has been with her husband, Hank, for 13 years, described to me her heightened awareness of her visibility when she is away from Philadelphia with her family. Every summer she and Hank take their three children to his family's cottage on Cape Cod for two months. She describes being more "attuned" in Cape Cod because "there are hardly any African-Americans."

For queer couples, the sexual environment of social landscapes was particularly important. As discussed earlier, gay and lesbian respondents felt less

compelled to manage their visibility in queer spaces. Racial difference, however, does not disappear within queer spaces and must be negotiated by interracial partners. For couples that desire and can find racially diverse queer spaces, this experience can be positive. When I asked Sylvia, a 29-year-old Black lesbian, how it felt to be an interracial couple in a queer space, she explains

There are ways I'm like it's totally normal and in some ways more normal to be an interracial queer couple . . . I don't know but I think like in some ways when you feel outside of your community it's easier to connect with someone.

In New York City Sylvia and Leslie are able to go to queer spaces that are racially mixed. Diverse racial atmospheres are important in order for each of them to feel comfortable. For couples in Philadelphia, gay and lesbian spaces are often racially segregated and diversity can be elusive.⁹

For Francine, a queer Black woman, being in a "people of color queer space" is extremely important for her, but it's not something she feels she needs to share with her partner, Kap.

Like Black dyke bars in Philly. They are not spaces for White people. There are no White people in those spaces. So first of all it would be like totally inappropriate for me to bring her. And then second of all, I wouldn't, I wouldn't feel comfortable because, like it would just be so random if I brought a White person into the space. And also, it's really important to me to have um, people of color of spaces that are like for people of color where I can go and be a person of color without my White girlfriend. And she's really appreciative of that . . . So I think it's important to make that distinction though cause you know saying "queer spaces" isn't really, I know I've said it a hundred times, isn't an adequate description. Especially in Philadelphia, because the queer worlds are very segregated.

Francine spends most of her social life in queer spaces, some of which are Black and some of which are White. While those spaces often allow her and her partner, Kap, to feel "safe" and "recognized," their racial dynamics can make her feel hypervisible as part of an interracial relationship.

Conclusion

. . . [B]y implicitly constructing same-sex couples as monoracial, scholars fail to consider the extent to which heterosexuality and White supremacy together saturate public spaces to render queer interraciality profoundly invisible. By analyzing interracial narratives of visibility and invisibility, I have offered a critique of the monoracial bias of sexuality research. I conclude with three important points. . . .

While heterosexual interraciality may be privileged relative to queer interraciality, heterosexual respondents in this study shared numerous experiences of invisibility as well as experiences of heightened visibility in which they had been verbally or physically threatened because the race of their sexual partner did not conform to norms of heterosexual monoraciality. That White supremacy in the US proscribes legitimate sexual behavior even among heterosexuals underscores the extent to which heterosexuals are a *sexually* as well as socially inscribed class. . . . While moments of visual dislocation frustrate both heterosexual and queer interracial couples, recognition of sexual intimacy can invoke the possibility of verbal or physical violence. At times interracial couples must therefore "manage" their visibility (Lasser and Tharinger, 2003) by "passing" as heterosexual friends (Johnson, 2002). Conditioned to anticipate possible hostility in public spaces, queer respondents engaged in this identity work more frequently than did heterosexual respondents. . . . I argue that locality is intricately tied to issues of visibility and invisibility. . . . [R]acial dynamics inhere to sexual landscapes, structuring permissible sexual behaviors and identities. Public spaces are not simply heterosexual or queer, they are imbued with assumptions about proper racial intimacy. . . .

[T]he nexus of racial difference and sexual intimacy is not only a productive site for examining visibility, but crucial terrain from which to theorize intersectionality, privilege, and marginalization.

NOTES

1. As Rubin (1984) points out, the only adult sexual behavior legal in every state is the placement of the penis in the vagina in wedlock. At the time Rubin wrote her essay,

this had only been true for 17 years, since *Loving v. Virginia* legalized interracial marriage across the US in 1967.

2. Special thanks to France Winddance Twine for emphasizing the necessity of such a critique.

3. A notable exception to this point is Ruth Frankenberg's (1993) *White Women, Race Matters* in which Frankenberg interviews White heterosexual and queer women involved in interracial relationships, discussing the intersectionality of racial difference and sexual intimacy.

4. Carbado's list can be seen as in conversation with Peggy McIntosh's work on White privilege (1988).

5. There is debate about this point. Boykin (1996) suggests that "Heterosexual orientation has become so ingrained in our social custom, so destigmatized of our fears about sex, that we often fail to make any connection between heterosexuality and sex." Carbado (2000) argues that the socially constructed normalcy of heterosexuality is not the result of a "desexualization" but rather the sexualization of heterosexuality as normative and natural.

6. In 2002, the Census reported 1,674,000 heterosexual interracial marriages (2.9% of all heterosexual marriages). Of these, Black-White interracial marriage accounted for 24% of all interracial marriages (US Census, 2003).

7. With a dissimilarity index for African-Americans of 0.810, New York City, where Warren and Nakia live, was the third most racially segregated city in the nation (US Census, 2002). The index of dissimilarity for African-Americans in Philadelphia in 2000 was 0.720, ranking Philadelphia the twelfth most segregated city in the nation (US Census, 2002).

8. According to the 2000 US Census, New York City is 45 percent White, 27 percent Black and 27 percent Hispanic (of any race).

9. There is no official index with which to measure the racial segregation of queer spaces. The racial composition of Philadelphia in 2000 is 45 percent White, 43 percent Black and 9 percent Hispanic (of any race).

REFERENCES

- Battles, K. and Hilton-Morrow, W. (2002) "Gay Characters in Conventional Spaces: *Will and Grace* and the Situational Comedy Genre," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19(1): 87-105.
- Boykin, K. (1996) *One More River to Cross: Black and Gay in America*. New York: Doubleday.
- Brickell, C. (2000) "Heroes and Invaders: Gay and Lesbian Pride Parades and the Public/Private Distinction in New Zealand Media Accounts," *Gender, Place and Culture* 7(2): 163-78.

- Carbado, D. (2000) "Straight Out of the Closet," *Berkeley Women's Law Journal* 15: 76–124.
- Carbado, D. and Gulati, M. (2000) "Working Identity," in *Cornell Law Review* 85: 1259–1308.
- Childs, E. C. (2001) "Constructing Interracial Couples: Multiple Narratives and Images," unpublished dissertation: Fordham University.
- Cohen, C. J. (1997) "Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" *GLQ* 3: 437–65.
- Collins, P. H. (2000) *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. London: Routledge.
- Dalmage, H. M. (2000) *Tripping on the Color Line: Black-White Multiracial Families in a Racially Divided World*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Davis, A. Y. (1983) *Women, Race and Class*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Donovan, C., Heaphy, B. and Weeks J. (1999) "Citizenship and Same Sex Relationships," *Journal of Social Policy* 28(4): 689–709.
- Dow, B. J. (2001) "Ellen, Television, and the Politics of Gay and Lesbian Visibility," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18(2): 123–40.
- Evans, D. T. (1993) *Sexual Citizenship: The Material Construction of Sexualities*. London: Routledge.
- Frankenberg, R. (1993) *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gross, L. (2001) *Up from Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men and the Media in America*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Herek, G. M. (1992) "The Social Context of Hate Crimes: Notes on Cultural Heterosexism," in G. M. Herek and K. T. Berrill (eds.) *Hate Crimes: Confronting Violence Against Lesbians and Gay Men*. London: Sage.
- Hildebrandt, M. D. (2002) "The Construction of Racial Inter-marriage: A Comparison of the Effects of Gender, Race, Class and Black Ethnicity in the Daily Lives of Black/White Couples," unpublished dissertation: Columbia University.
- James, J. (1996) *Resisting State Violence: Radicalism, Gender and Race in US Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Johnson, C. (2002) "Heteronormative Citizenship and the Politics of Passing," *Sexualities* 5(3): 317–36.
- Lasser, J. and Tharinger, D. (2003) "Visibility Management in School and Beyond: A Qualitative Study of Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Youth," *Journal of Adolescence* 26: 233–44.
- McIntosh, P. (1988). "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to see Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies," Working Paper 189: Wellesley Collage Center for Research on Women.
- Rich, A. (1980) "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5(4): 631–60.
- Richardson, D. (1996) "Heterosexuality and Social Theory," in D. Richardson (ed.) *Theorising Heterosexuality*. Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press.
- Richardson, D. (2000) *Rethinking Sexuality*. London: Sage.
- Rosenblatt, P. C., Karis, T. A. and Powell, R. D. (1995) *Multiracial Couples: Black and White Voices*. New York: Sage.
- Rubin, G. (1984) "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in C. Vance (ed.) *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*. London: Routledge.
- Shugart, H. A. (2003) "Reinventing Privilege: The New (Gay) Man in Contemporary Popular Media," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 20(1): 67–91.
- US Census Bureau (2002) "Residential Segregation for Blacks of African Americans in Large Metropolitan Areas: 1980, 1990 and 2000," *Racial and Ethnic Residential Segregation in the United States: 1980–2000, Table 5-4*.
- US Census Bureau (2003) "Children's Living Arrangements and Characteristics: March 2002," *Annual Demographic Supplement to the March 2002 Current Population Survey, Current Population Reports, Series P20-547*.
- Walters, S. D. (2001) *All the Rage: The Story of Gay Visibility in America*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Weeks, J., Heaphy, B. and Donovan C. (2001) *Same Sex Intimacies: Families of Choice and Other Life Experiences*. London: Routledge.
- Wells, I. B. (1997 [1892]) "Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in all its Phases," in J. J. Royster (ed.) *Southern Horrors and Other Writings: The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892–1900*. Boston, MA: Bedford Books.

reading 33

Latinos On da Down Low

M. Alfredo González

Saturday Night in El Bronx

That Saturday night of February 2001, Michael and I went to hang out to a South Bronx club not far from where I lived in upper Manhattan. We knew each other for almost 20 years and lately, we had to set up formal dates to catch up with each other. After being frisked for weapons and paying admission, we entered a room packed with tough-looking Black and Latino young men. Michael looked at me with curiosity and asked, "you've been here before, Alfredo?" "Yeah; twice," I responded. "And, are you sure this is a gay club?" "Of course," I answered more interested in checking out the scene. Michael was puzzled by the total indifference that greeted us and the aloof-looking crowd pulsating to the rhythm of rap music. "Let me ask," he said and went to one of the security guys by the door. Michael grew up in the Lower East Side and to me, he is the quintessential New Yorker: bold and assertive. He is the kind of guy that would not flinch at asking "is this a gay club" once he is already in it. "Alright, let's check our coats," he said as he returned persuaded.

Michael preferred the larger dance floor upstairs. The house music, the mirror balls, and the dancing styles made it more gay-identifiable. *Caushun*,¹ "The Gay Rapper," was the star of that night's show. I could not make out all the words in his rhyme, but three were clear: "I swallowed it." Next to us stood a tall, masculine and handsome young Latino in oversized pants and a basketball tank top bouncing to the beat. Michael, the Latino chaser, turned to him and

asked him, "Do you swallow it?" (Did I mention he was bold?) The guy turned to us with a big smile and replied: "No, I eat it."

That night, I believed we had gone to a gay dance club that local young men attended because it played the music they liked, because it was located close to where they lived, or because they were as bored with the downtown scene as I was. Six months later I realized Michael's doubts that night, had merit: two articles, one by Kai Wright in the *Village Voice*, and another by Malcolm Venable in *Vibe*, discussed African American and Latino men who had sex with men *on the down low* (i.e. on the sly, undercover), but did not identify as Gay (Venable, 2001; Wright, 2001; Denizet-Lewis, 2003). These journalistic accounts listed the South Bronx club as a meeting place for men *on the low* (Trebay, 2000), and reported that some of them may be having sex with women who ignored their homosexual practices (Venable, 2001). They were characterized as interested in rap music and marked masculine demeanor in their sex partners and themselves (Trebay, 2000; Venable, 2001; Wright, 2001).

The articles on the *down low* published in the popular press describe young men unfazed by the tension between their non-normative sexualities and their otherwise conventional Black and Latino working-class male identities. At the core of their secrecy, is their refusal to politicize their intimacy, that is, to adopt a public gay identity.² While the literature on same-sex practices among African Americans lists religion as a paramount deterrent of sexual expression, men on the *down low* do not cite choosing between *right* and *wrong* as a dilemma. Like the broad smile of our "handsome Latino" in the South Bronx club suggests, the young men quoted in these articles do not seem to experience guilt for rejecting Judeo-Christian strictures. Their quandary is not ethical but

From "Latinos On da Down Low: The Limitations of Sexual Identity in Public Health" by M. Alfredo Gonzalez, *Latino Studies*, 5, 25–52. Copyright © 2007, published by Palgrave Macmillan. Reprinted by permission from Macmillan Publishers Ltd.